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ROBERT HAYDEN

A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

ROBERT HAYDEN: A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

Robert Hayden writes poetry that grabs his readers physically. The intensity and wide range of his emotions makes readers remember his poems as their own personal experiences. They remember the desperation of "Night, Death, Mississippi," the bright courage of "Homage to the Empress of the Blues," the pity in "Mystery Boy Looks for Kin in Nashville," and the wry defiance in "Aunt Jemima of the Ocean Waves." His poems achieve their power chiefly because they are dramatic. They have something of the best video documentaries: snatches of speech by living people speaking in authentic settings (Aunt Jemima smoking a cigarette on the beach during a break from the factory, the old lyncher's daughter shouting at her kids to "fetch Paw/some water now so's he/can wash the blood off him," Harriet Tubman turning on the runaway slaves with a levelled pistol). Sometimes he achieves that power just by choosing an unusual word, so surprising and so right that it startles with pleasure ("fear starts a-murbling," "adagios of sun," "fists of snow"). And sometimes he achieves it by using ordinary words with biting ambivalence ("night betrayed by darkness not its own.") But in each poem, he seems to save a moment for a personal note to himself, a reminder to us all as well, to keep steering toward our own version of things, no matter our regard for our masters. In one of his most artless, open poems, "Kodachromes of the Island," he points to the double vision necessary to create: "Alien, at home — as always/everywhere—I roamed/the cobbled island, // and thought of Yeats,/his passionate search for/ a theme. Sought mine."

Robert Hayden died at the age of sixty-six in 1980. It is no exaggeration to claim that many more readers read him today than in his own lifetime. The poetry consultant to the Library of Congress for two terms, he was the beloved teacher of many contemporary writers and artists. His legacy includes nine volumes of poems, and a volume of collected prose. FIELD is delighted to salute him once more, some eighty years after his birth.

THOSE WINTER SUNDAYS

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

THOSE WINTER SUNDAYS

I ask myself why "Those Winter Sundays" is my favorite Hayden poem. Partly, I think, because it is already a part of my life. I remember the sounds of my father banking the furnace at night, shaking down the ashes, shoveling on fresh coal; and I remember the quick dive from under the covers in the morning to the warm dining room, the warm bathrobe, and the hot Wheatena with cream, all this taken for granted, with no thanks given or expected.

It is also my favorite because it is not angry, in a politically orthodox way. It might have been written for any father, anywhere, for whom love is habitual.

The poem is my favorite too because it draws so little attention to itself, as if it were unpremeditated art. It is a poem that happens to one. The poet uses slant rhyme in every line and repeats a serious reproach in exactly the same words in the next-to-last, but he so subordinates these devices that they seem to be a natural part of his spoken voice. And he restrains his judgment until the end, where he implies it, chiefly in two words, *austere* and *lonely*.

This poem's power is such that one sits silent after reading it, slowly absorbing what has happened, as I have just done, slowly realizing that my father's morning and evening furnace chores were not merely habit, but love, that love is an austere master, not soft or kind, that shined shoes are not just "keeping up with the Joneses," but a form of worship, that loving is lonely because it is its own reward, that most domestic nagging is superficial, and, finally, that love is dailiness, as all grown-ups know, and now, at long last, I know too.

I cannot think of any poem more certain or any that I am more profoundly thankful to have known.

FREE FANTASIA: TIGER FLOWERS

(For Michael)

The sporting people
along St. Antoine —
that scufflers'
paradise of ironies —
        bet salty money
on his righteous
        hook and jab.

I was a boy then, running
(unbeknownst to Pa)
errands for Miss Jackie
and Stack-o'-Diamonds' Eula Mae.
. . . Their perfumes,
rouged Egyptian faces.
        Their pianolas jazzing.

O Creole babies,
Dixie odalisques,
speeding through cutglass
dark to see the macho angel
        trick you'd never
turn, his bluesteel prowess
        in the ring.

Hardshell believers
amen'd the wreck
as God A'mighty's
will. I'd thought
        such gaiety could not
die. Nor could our
        elegant avenger.

The Virgin Forest
by Rousseau —
its psychedelic flowers
towering, its deathless
        dark dream figure
death the leopard
        claws — I choose it
now as elegy
        for Tiger Flowers.

ELEGY FOR AN AMERICAN

Becoming an American is not as easy as it looks. We have known for a long time that being born here does not dispose of the matter. Generally, it requires some degree of acceptance by the "natives" before the applicant will be able to believe it himself. Some triumph over origin also is required, some breaking of old bonds, even if the origin we are talking about is one's neighborhood. Put another way, there is something of the harlequin in every American, a reconciliation of warring elements — colors, especially — in one integrated whole. The essential tension is provided by the pull of where we are from as against who we are trying to become.

Robert Hayden was singularly effective in documenting this process of becoming American. This seems a curious inquiry and, to be sure, many if not most American writers begin from the premise that the appellation comes with the territory. But Hayden hails from a people for whom becoming American has been a difficult and bitter experience, and so it is not surprising that Hayden, like Ralph Ellison, has given the matter much thought. Like Ellison, Hayden believed that the definition of what it is to be an American is still open and evolving. Despite appearances to the contrary, we are still trying to reach some larger consensus, and that consensus must revolve around the core of American experience — to transcend our individual and collective histories without betraying them, to make of the nation, as well as of ourselves, a whole that is more than the sum of its parts.

As a boy growing up in the Detroit slum known as Paradise Valley, Hayden saw posters advertising the bouts of Tiger Flowers, who became the first black middleweight champion in 1926. It is easy to see why the name attracted Hayden. Like the other harlequins who inhabit his poems — the quadroon mermaids, the cannibal mockingbird, the part Seminole Gypsy confidante, and the Tattooed Man — Tiger Flowers proffers the quintessential American profile: the artful reconciliation of personal and ethnic origins in one new and powerful whole.

Men do not climb into boxing rings with other men out of an

inability to decide among more desirable options. Nor do they climb into the ring alone. Instead, they carry the anger and hope of those who look and feel and live like them. So it was with Tiger Flowers, "elegant avenger" of St. Antoine, "scuffler's paradise of ironies," champion of "sporting people," "Dixie odalisques," "hard-shell believers," and errand boys.

The fighter's name suggests the tension between personal and racial origins that Hayden, former errand boy and spy in his own country, must have felt all along. It combines the lushness of African landscape with the Detroit savvy of an urban nickname. In its marriage of animal and vegetable, there is reference both to the natural balance of an unretrievable past and the mocking denial of an inhospitable present with its violent and tragic end. Finally, there is the suggestion of beauty that must be admired from a distance, that protects itself from intruders, including gamblers and envious whores.

The reconciliation of these origins, however, does not come to the eyes of the errand boy, but to those of the man. Presumably, it is years later in the future Pa envisioned, far away from the influences of Miss Jackie and Eula Mae. In Rousseau's *The Virgin Forest*, painted by a self-taught "primitive" like Hayden's avenger, Hayden finds a scene that plays out the fighter's name on canvas. The dead fighter, "dark dream figure," is at peace among the bright dream flowers. He has fought the good fight. Like Rousseau, like Hayden of Paradise Valley, he has transcended his origins without betrayal or loss. He has accomplished the task of becoming American.

MIDDLE PASSAGE

I

Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy:

Sails flashing to the wind like weapons,
sharks following the moans the fever and the dying;
horror the corposant and compass rose.

Middle Passage:
voyage through death
to life upon these shores.

"10 April 1800 —
Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says
their moaning is a prayer for death,
ours and their own. Some try to starve themselves.
Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter
to the waiting sharks, sang as they went under."

Desire, Adventure, Tartar, Ann:

Standing to America, bringing home
black gold, black ivory, black seed.

Deep in the festering hold thy father lies,
of his bones New England pews are made,
those are altar lights that were his eyes.

Jesus Saviour Pilot Me
Over Life's Tempestuous Sea

We pray that Thou wilt grant, O Lord,
safe passage to our vessels bringing
heathen souls unto Thy chastening.

Jesus Saviour

"8 bells. I cannot sleep, for I am sick
with fear, but writing eases fear a little
since still my eyes can see these words take shape
upon the page & so I write, as one
would turn to exorcism. 4 days scudding,
but now the sea is calm again. Misfortune
follows in our wake like sharks (our grinning
tutelary gods). Which one of us
has killed an albatross? A plague among
our blacks — Ophthalmia: blindness — & we
have jettisoned the blind to no avail.
It spreads, the terrifying sickness spreads.
Its claws have scratched sight from the Capt.'s eyes
& there is blindness in the fo'c'sle
& we must sail 3 weeks before we come
to port."

What port awaits us, Davy Jones'
or home? I've heard of slavers drifing, drifting,
playthings of wind and storm and chance, their crews
gone blind, the jungle hatred
crawling up on deck.

Thou Who Walked On Galilee

"Deponent further sayeth *The Bella J*
left the Guinea Coast
with cargo of five hundred blacks and odd
for the barracoons of Florida:

"That there was hardly room 'tween-decks for half
the sweltering cattle stowed spoon-fashion there;
that some went mad of thirst and tore their flesh
and sucked the blood:

"That Crew and Captain lusted with the comeliest
of the savage girls kept naked in the cabins;
that there was one they called The Guinea Rose
and they cast lots and fought to lie with her:

"That when the Bo's'n piped all hands, the flames
spreading from starboard already were beyond
control, the negroes howling and their chains
entangled with the flames:

"That the burning blacks could not be reached,
that the Crew abandoned ship,
leaving their shrieking negresses behind,
that the Captain perished drunken with the wenches:

"Further Deponent sayeth not."

Pilot Oh Pilot Me

II

Aye, lad, and I have seen those factories,
Gambia, Rio Pongo, Calabar;
have watched the artful mongos baiting traps
of war wherein the victor and the vanquished

Were caught as prizes for our barracoons.
Have seen the nigger kings whose vanity
and greed turned wild black hides of Fellatah,
Mandingo, Ibo, Kru to gold for us.

And there was one — King Anthracite we named him —
fetish face beneath French parasols
of brass and orange velvet, impudent mouth
whose cups were carven skulls of enemies:

He'd honor us with drum and feast and conjo
and palm-oil-glistening wenches deft in love,
and for tin crowns that shone with paste,
red calico and German-silver trinkets

Would have the drums talk war and send
his warriors to burn the sleeping villages
and kill the sick and old and lead the young
in coffles to our factories.

Twenty years a trader, twenty years,
for there was wealth aplenty to be harvested
from those black fields, and I'd be trading still
but for the fevers melting down my bones.

III

Shuttles in the rocking loom of history,
the dark ships move, the dark ships move,
their bright ironical names
like jests of kindness on a murderer's mouth;
plough through thrashing glister toward
fata morgana's lucent melting shore,
weave toward New World littorals that are
mirage and myth and actual shore.

Voyage through death,
voyage whose chartings are unlove.
A charnel stench, effluvium of living death
spreads outward from the hold,
where the living and the dead, the horribly dying,
lie interlocked, lie foul with blood and excrement.

Deep in the festering hold thy father lies,
the corpse of mercy rots with him,
rats eat love's rotten gelid eyes.

But, oh, the living look at you
with human eyes whose suffering accuses you,
whose hatred reaches through the swill of dark
to strike you like a leper's claw.

You cannot stare that hatred down
or chain the fear that stalks the watches
and breathes on you its fetid scorching breath;
cannot kill the deep immortal human wish,
the timeless will.

"But for the storm that flung up barriers
of wind and wave, *The Amistad*, señores,
would have reached the port of Príncipe in two,
three days at most; but for the storm we should
have been prepared for what befell.
Swift as the puma's leap it came. There was
that interval of moonless calm filled only
with the water's and the rigging's usual sounds,
then sudden movement, blows and snarling cries
and they had fallen on us with machete
and marlinspike. It was as though the very
air, the night itself were striking us.
Exhausted by the rigors of the storm,
we were no match for them. Our men went down
before the murderous Africans. Our loyal
Celestino ran from below with gun
and lantern and I saw, before the cane-
knife's wounding flash, Cinquez,
that surly brute who calls himself a prince,
directing, urging on the ghastly work.
He hacked the poor mulatto down, and then
he turned on me. The decks were slippery
when daylight finally came. It sickens me
to think of what I saw, of how these apes
threw overboard the butchered bodies of

our men, true Christians all, like so much jetsam.
Enough, enough. The rest is quickly told:
Cinquez was forced to spare the two of us
you see to steer the ship to Africa,
and we like phantoms doomed to rove the sea
voyaged east by day and west by night,
deceiving them, hoping for rescue,
prisoners on our own vessel, till
at length we drifted to the shores of this
your land, America, where we were freed
from our unspeakable misery. Now we
demand, good sirs, the extradition of
Cinquez and his accomplices to La
Havana. And it distresses us to know
there are so many here who seem inclined
to justify the mutiny of these blacks.
We find it paradoxical indeed
that you whose wealth, whose tree of liberty
are rooted in the labor of your slaves
should suffer the august John Quincy Adams
to speak with so much passion of the right
of chattel slaves to kill their lawful masters
and with his Roman rhetoric weave a hero's
garland for Cinquez. I tell you that
we are determined to return to Cuba
with our slaves and there see justice done. Cinquez —
or let us say 'the Prince' — Cinquez shall die."

The deep immortal human wish,
the timeless will:

Cinquez its deathless primaveral image,
life that transfigures many lives.

Voyage through death
to life upon these shores.

ROBERT HAYDEN: THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE

Robert Hayden's mother, a glamorous woman of mixed race, appeared to be white; his father, Asa Sheffey, was a black laborer. That marriage failed and, at eighteen months, Robert was given to be raised by Sue Ellen and William Hayden. At that time he was rechristened; some question arose whether he had been legally adopted. A long and damaging struggle for his custody and loyalty ensued. Late in life, he considered changing his name back to Asa Bundy Sheffey.

The Hayden household was, moreover, troubled with poverty and its own internal struggles. Robert's foster-father, another black laborer, was sternly patriarchal; his wife had previously been married, probably to a white. According to Hayden's biographer, the wife "could never forget [her first husband] and, unfortunately, never let William Hayden forget him either." In any case, Robert had ample cause to be aware of race and racial mixtures; he himself said that he was nearly as light-skinned as Italian or Jewish playmates in their mixed neighborhood.

Not only in matters of race did he find himself between stools. Like many intellectuals at that time, he felt a sympathy for Marxist theory and politics, but quickly became disillusioned with the Communist party. Raised a strict Baptist, he later converted to Baha'i, a faith that recognizes the viability of all the major religions. Though he was a devoted husband and father, he wrote of the torments of his bisexual condition. His literary allegiances were similarly divided. He never lost his early love for the black poets Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes; in time, however, he came also to admire, and learn from, Keats, Auden, Yeats, Eliot.

Most of this information comes from Pontheolla Williams' admirable study, *Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry*. Prof. Williams notes that though he often felt torn between antagonistic races, competing families, religions, political groups, artistic traditions, such a position has, for an artist, peculiar advantages. We might recall Isaiah Berlin's recognition that we all make our decisions, define our lives, under the influence of competing sys-

tems of value. Just as Hayden's familial division caused him lifelong pain, he must often have longed for an exclusive racial, political or philosophical commitment — to be a hedgehog, not a fox. Yet that would have meant suppressing some part of his background, so of himself. In a lesser person, this might have led to a desperate clutching at some narrow code of allegiance and self-definition. For a man of Hayden's compassion and honesty, it led to a recognition of his pivotal position as an American, himself the "melting pot" of multiple demands, influences and traditions. To his work, it brought the kind of "negative capability" so much admired by Keats — a willingness to see the many sides, the complex relativity of our situation, a freedom from any "irritable reaching" after some comforting dogma.

I shall aim, here, to take this aspect of Prof. Williams' argument and to demonstrate, in greater detail than she could spare, how this broader humanism informs three of Hayden's best known and most admired poems.

"Those Winter Sundays," deservedly famous, describes William Hayden, the foster-father with whom Robert did not always get along. Yet, despite the family's grinding poverty and his own lack of education, he made it possible for Robert to continue his schooling at Detroit City College (now Wayne State University) and the University of Michigan. It remained a matter of constant self-reproach to Robert that he had never adequately shown the gratitude he felt.

The poem displays an almost uncanny skill in handling its subject. In its very first line, a wealth of meaning lurks in the simple word "too" — an awareness that each and every day, the father rose early to a cold house and either went off to work or, worse, to seek work. The following five lines are linked by a beautifully crafted chain of echoes underlining the hardship of the father's life: "clothes . . . blueblack cold . . . cracked . . . ached . . . weekday weather . . . banked . . . blaze . . . thanked . . . wake . . . breaking." Only in the second stanza, once the cold abates and the boy rises to dress, is this pattern dissolved into the comforting sounds of "warm," "call" and "slowly."

It is the third stanza, though, to which I would draw particu-

lar attention for its tact and generosity. To have "driven out the cold" might seem enough; to have "polished my good shoes as well" reaches, without losing credibility, toward a higher goodness. If we changed this line to read something like "and ironed my Sunday clothes as well," the poem would evaporate. Not only does polishing his foster-son's shoes show a deep humility (especially when blacks have often been reduced to such menial tasks for whites), but it carries the suggestion, however slight, of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. So the father lowers himself to an almost priestly, if not saintly, height. This alone justifies the suddenly elevated language of the last line, crediting the father with "love's austere and lonely offices" — those duties or ceremonial acts which, in themselves, constitute a religious observance.

Yet despite these literary excellences, it is another quality — one related to the overall argument of the paper — which most attracts me. That is the willingness to say, "I was wrong" — to be shocked at one's own insensitivity. What could more acutely bespeak guilt than "No one ever thanked him" or, more personally, "I would rise . . . Speaking indifferently to him" and again, "What did I know, what did I know . . . ?" We need not draw attention to the myriads of accusatory and self-justifying poems one sees almost daily — poems meant to prove that "I am right to hate whom I hate" — to recognize this poem's humane warmth and a humility comparable to the father's. It is this, I think — or dare to hope — that has made it Hayden's best-known poem.

One might argue, however, that Hayden's broad humanism and awareness of other existences, other viewpoints than his own, while informing the subject matter and attitude of this poem, do not express themselves through its technique. There is little in its style or structure idiosyncratic to Hayden — in these qualities it seems not unlike certain poems by Thomas Hardy, William Stafford or, more recently, Len Roberts. Something quite different happens in such a poem as "Night, Death, Mississippi."

The first of the poem's two sections presents a rural white Southerner who overhears a lynching in the woods near his house and regrets that he cannot be there with "Boy" — probably his

son. Two voices are heard, the narrator and the old man, though neither punctuation nor typography distinguishes them. Some of the lines describing the old man's thoughts or recollections —

> A quavering cry.
>
> White robes like moonlight
> In the Sweetgum dark

— seem too literate for a man who refers to his son merely as "Boy." Such lines, I think, represent the old man's perceptions as filtered through the narrator's richer consciousness.

No doubt, some of those who attacked Hayden's work would find it offensive that he devotes such vivid realization to this violent and ugly old man, not to a condemnation of lynching or to a contrastingly admirable figure, probably black. Yet, though the poem may appear detached and objective, at no point do we doubt Hayden's opinion or values. From the first, the narrator has established a disgust for the old man's crudity:

> The old man in his reek
> and gauntness laughs —

Later, we find much the same tone:

> He hawks and spits,
> fevered as by groinfire.

That word, of course, openly defines the subject's driving sadism. But we have heard that even more clearly in the man's own words:

> Unbucked that one then
> and him squealing bloody Jesus
> as we cut if off.

When a man has so clearly damned himself from his own mouth, any commentary could only weaken the portrait's force by suggesting some element of self-interest in the writer.

The second section creates a musical construct based on the material of the first, but as seen from different perspectives. Prof. Williams sees the three primary stanzas as comprising a single scene, contiguous with the first section: the first two being "Boy's" tale when he comes back from the lynching; the third spoken by a woman, probably the old man's daughter, telling the children to bring water so "Paw" can wash the blood off "Boy." At the same time, if one read the third stanza to mean that "Paw" should wash the blood off himself, one could take these stanzas as pertaining to other lynchings, other characters. In either case, a horrifying irony is created by the contrast between the family's solicitude for a family member and the virulent exultation shown over the victims of his savage violence.

These stanzas are interrupted and balanced, however, by three separate lines given in italics much as a refrain might be. These lines both associate the victim with Jesus' crucifixion and identify the crucial darkness as neither that of the night, nor of the Negroes' skin, but as that of the lynchers' souls. The tone here is of lyrical lamentation; the antiphonal effect is comparable to a church service where the choir interrupts and punctuates the preacher's text with a series of sung refrains.

Yet there is an important difference: one assumes that the choir and preacher are ultimately in harmony, saying the same thing; here the narrative and the lyrical interjections stand in sharp contrast and opposition. To find a comparable musical effect one would have to turn, I think, to classical music — to something like the first chorus from Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" where the doubts and questionings of the main choir are balanced against the pure faith and certainty of the boys' choir. Or to the slow movement of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto where the angry assertions of the lower strings are balanced and finally soothed away by the calm and tender rejoinders of the soloist. Such a comparison may, at first, seem strained; I do not think

Hayden would have found it so. Had his eyesight been stronger, he might have become a violinist; an early poem is devoted to "Beethoven." In any case, he would have been aware of the principles of opposition between themes upon which all sonata forms are built.

Only by such an example can I indicate the kind of musical construct Hayden is creating. Above all, he is preserving opposed and various parts of his awareness, counterposing them in a structure that does justice to the variousness of experience and imagination. At the same time, he never obscures his own sense of values, of confronting a positive and horrifying evil.

This technique of juxtaposing fragments of scenes and the voices of differing points of view reaches its fullest realization in such poems as "Runagate, Runagate" and most especially in "Middle Passage." The method owes much to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, yet its purpose is, finally, completely different. All the voices one hears in *The Waste Land* are, finally, aspects of one mind, memories retained by, or emotions discovered in, a single personality. The various scenes in "Middle Passage" would not all have been experienced by any one character; the various voices one hears belong to a multiplicity of characters, each having a disparate and independent existence. Not only do they not speak for Hayden or his narrator, several are allowed, once again, to damn themselves from their own mouths. *The Waste Land*'s final aim is to concretize and explore the sensibility of its speaker and his sense of meaninglessness which rises from an affectional and sexual loss. The purpose of "Middle Passage," even though we have some interest in the narrator's meditations, is not to render a state of mind, but rather to let the reader partake of an experience in the outside world, the horror of the slave trade, then to join in celebrating Cinquez who fought against it.

To do so, Hayden has collected, during a long period of research, a great variety of materials. His weaving of these into the three sections of the poem is masterful. In part I, the first group, six stanzas, present and comment on the general scene of the slave ships. First we encounter a simple list of ships' names, names

which would translate, Jesus, Star (with a suggestion of Fate), Hope, Mercy. Immediately the narrator's imagery, "Sails flashing . . . like weapons,/sharks following . . . /horror the corposant and compass rose," underlines the irony of those pious names and establishes, once and for all, the poem's attitude.

The narrator continues:

> Middle Passage:
> voyage through death
> to life upon these shores,

lines which will be repeated as the last lines of the poem. This is succeeded by a dated entry from a ship's log, recording and concretizing the misery inflicted upon the blacks, another list of ships, the narrator's statement of destination:

> Standing to America, bringing home
> black gold, black ivory, black seed.

This mention of seed reminds the speaker that his own ancestors were brought here by just such ships:

> *Deep in the festering hold thy father lies,*
> *of his bones New England pews are made,*
> *those are altar lights which were his eyes.*

The mention of pews and altar lights brings the poem into a new grouping of stanzas, another scene — a New England church where the congregation sings a hymn befitting mariners:

> Jesus Saviour Pilot Me
> Over Life's Tempestuous Sea

We continue with the smarmy hypocrisy of the sermon and a repetition of the hymn's opening, "Jesus Saviour." This time, however, the hymn may be taken also as the narrator's prayer as he imagines the sufferings of the cargo blacks.

The ensuing pair of stanzas takes us back aboard ship. "8 bells. I cannot sleep, for I am sick/ with fear, . . ." might well come from that same sailor who wrote the earlier log entry. This much more personal passage, however, must come from a diary or letter he is writing. His fear is not only of a potential revolt of the imprisoned blacks but also of the illness — "Ophthalmia: blindness" — which has spread from the slaves to the crew and captain. The ship is still 3 weeks from port "& there is blindness in the fo'c'sle." "Which one of us/ has killed an albatross?" he asks, so witnessing his own moral blindness to the crimes of his mates and himself.

The following deeply indented and italicized lines, beginning *"What port awaits us, Davy Jones'/ or home? . . . ,"* render the narrator's effort to identify with such a sailor. This particular passage, with its fear of aimlessly drifting with "the jungle hatred crawling up on deck," also serves as a plant for the poem's ending where Cinquez and the slaves rebel and take command of the *Amistad*.

Another portion from the earlier hymn, "Thou Who Walked On Galilee," brings us to a third scene: the courtroom where we hear the deposition of a sailor who escaped the burning and sinking of the *Bella J*. This was apparently caused by the carelessness of the drunken captain and his sexually rapacious crew who either fled or perished leaving the blacks to be burned with the ship. A particular irony is created, however, by the contrast between the formal courtroom language and the horrors depicted:

"Deponent further sayeth . . .

"That there was hardly room 'tween-decks for half
the sweltering cattle stowed spoon-fashion there;
that some went mad of thirst and tore their flesh
and sucked the blood:

"That Crew and Captain lusted with the comeliest
of the savage girls kept naked in the cabins; . . .

"Further Deponent sayeth not."

A final recollection of the hymn, "Pilot Oh Pilot Me," closes the section.

I have treated part I in considerable detail because its somewhat difficult materials must be fully grasped if we are to realize the overall structure of the poem, but also because this seems to me one of the most remarkable structures in American poetry. Read aloud, with the appropriate parts sung (as, incidentally, portions of *The Waste Land* should be) it has an almost overwhelming effect.

Part II embodies a single voice; its comparative simplicity is rather like the slow movement of a symphony or other musical composition containing several contrasting parts. The single voice is that of an old slave-trader recounting his exotic adventures to a younger man or boy. Several passages —

> Twenty years a trader, twenty years . . .
> . . . and I'd be trading still
> but for the fevers melting down my bones

— are reminiscent of the old would-be lyncher of "Night, Death, Mississippi":

> Be there with Boy and the rest
> if I was well again.
> Time was. Time was.
>
> . . . fevered as by groinfire.

Part III returns to the juxtapositions of part I but is altogether simpler in construction. It opens with the narrator's brief summation of the significance of the slave trade, then goes to a passage, again indented and italicized, in which he turns to a deeper meditation. This, again, includes the attempt to feel his way into the mind of one of the sailors, a man not devoid of pity or guilt:

But, oh, the living look at you
with human eyes whose suffering accuses you,
whose hatred reaches . . .

The climax of this last section, however, lies in the long speech by a Spanish sailor who survived the mutiny aboard the *Amistad* — and who asks now that the mutineers, "Cinquez and his accomplices," be sent to Havana for execution. His speech has its eloquence, yet its effect on the reader is tempered by the inclusion of his plea that the court should not heed the words of John Quincy Adams who, indeed, actually defended the *Amistad* mutineers. The Spaniard's complaint is that Adams would "with his Roman rhetoric weave a hero's/ garland for Cinquez." Though intending sarcasm, these lines begin the open celebration of Cinquez as a hero who brings his people, unlike those aboard the *Bella J*, out of captivity.

Where part I had ended in the tragic and grisly burning of the *Bella J*, part III closes in a moment of triumph. This triumph, however, summarizes and collects much material which went before and subjects it to important ironies. Above all, the fact that this Spanish sailor had served as the blacks' steersman, or pilot, misleading and finally bringing them to America, projects crucial questions backward toward the earlier hymn, "Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me." The blacks, fresh from Africa, cannot serve as their own steersmen, yet Jesus — at least that Jesus imagined by the white New England congregation or by the Spanish sailor — cannot save them, may even mislead them into death and slavery. This questioning of Christian guidance must be closely related to Hayden's conversion to the Baha'i faith.

The poem *does* end, however, on a note of triumph, picking up two lines on the will to freedom from earlier in this section, applying them directly to Cinquez:

The deep immortal human wish,
the timeless will:
Cinquez its deathless primaveral image,
life that transfigures many lives.

On this tribute, the poem closes, incorporating two lines from the poem's very beginning to serve as summation and coda:

> Voyage through death
> to life upon these shores.

Now, however, this line has added ironies since it is clear that, for many, "life upon these shores" will not be much better than death at sea. Yet some will indeed survive and, especially with such examples as Cinquez's love of freedom, may yet build a better life there.

As might be expected, this did not satisfy many of the extremists. Some criticized Hayden for using his "best" irony to depict the Spanish cause. Yet it is hard to believe that any intelligent or sensitive person could read this passage and think it favored the Spanish side.

That "negative capability" for which Keats so honored Shakespeare is, of course, the breadth of his sympathy, the near-universality of his empathy. The honor we bestow upon our greatest poet, Walt Whitman, is again because of that inclusive humanity — that he can identify not only with the victim, with the wounded slave, but also with the overseer and the patroller.

It may be that the only good poet is a dead poet. It would seem that Robert Hayden has now been dead long enough that we might pay him some part of the respect and honor which he so painfully and patiently earned.

RUNAGATE RUNAGATE

I.

Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into darkness
and the darkness thicketed with shapes of terror
and the hunters pursuing and the hounds pursuing
and the night cold and the night long and the river
to cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beckoning beckoning
and blackness ahead and when shall I reach that somewhere
morning and keep on going and never turn back and keep on
going
Runagate
Runagate
Runagate

Many thousands rise and go
many thousands crossing over
O mythic North
O star-shaped yonder Bible city

Some go weeping and some rejoicing
some in coffins and some in carriages
some in silks and some in shackles

Rise and go or fare you well

No more auction block for me
no more driver's lash for me

If you see my Pompey, 30 yrs of age,
new breeches, plain stockings, negro shoes;
if you see my Anna, likely young mulatto
branded E on the right cheek, R on the left,
catch them if you can and notify subscriber.
Catch them if you can, but it won't be easy.
They'll dart underground when you try to catch them,

plunge into quicksand, whirlpools, mazes,
turn into scorpions when you try to catch them.

And before I'll be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave

North star and bonanza gold
I'm bound for the freedom, freedom-bound
and oh Susyanna don't you cry for me

Runagate

Runagate

II.

Rises from their anguish and their power,

Harriet Tubman,

woman of earth, whipscarred,
a summoning, a shining

Mean to be free

And this was the way of it, brethren brethren,
way we journeyed from Can't to Can.
Moon so bright and no place to hide,
the cry up and the patterollers riding,
hound dogs belling in bladed air.
And fear starts a-murbling, Never make it,
we'll never make it. *Hush that now,*
and she's turned upon us, levelled pistol
glinting in the moonlight:
Dead folks can't jaybird-talk, she says;
you keep on going now or die, she says.

Wanted Harriet Tubman alias The General
alias Moses Stealer of Slaves

In league with Garrison Alcott Emerson
Garrett Douglas Thoreau John Brown

Armed and known to be Dangerous

Wanted Reward Dead or Alive

Tell me, Ezekiel, oh tell me do you see
mailed Jehovah coming to deliver me?

Hoot-owl calling in the ghosted air,
five times calling to the hants in the air.
Shadow of a face in the scary leaves,
shadow of a voice in the talking leaves:

Come ride-a my train

Oh that train, ghost-story train
through swamp and savanna movering movering,
over trestles of dew, through caves of the wish,
Midnight Special on a sabre track movering movering,
first stop Mercy and the last Hallelujah.

Come ride-a my train

Mean mean mean to be free.

SHINING

For two hundred fifty years one of the main actions of resistance and survival for slaves was the action of flight. Even after slavery, flight from injustice and violence continued into the present century as an incumbent feature of being black in the United States.

Consistent with the African cultural heritage where art is not only a reflection of but an integral part of everyday life, flight became a dominant theme in the New World expressions of African-American people. The theme first appears in the "primitive" sorrow-and-hope songs, which are the sacred spirituals and secular blues created by the unlettered black masses. Later on, flight occupies a major place in the "classical" works of the learned, self-conscious Negro artists. Robert Hayden's "Runagate Runagate" is one of the most highly polished examples.

During the mid-1930s, Hayden was employed in one of the Federal Writers Projects where he researched Negro history and culture. Eventually a number of significant works came out of this research. "Runagate Runagate" is one of them. In the first stanza Hayden captures the danger and terror of Negro flight by weaving a tapestry of common words without the interruption of punctuation, words that reach out and engage if not engulf the reader. The matrix of words running on for seven rather long lines creates a forest of language that conjures the thick danger of the chase. The rush of words suggests both the relentless drive of black vernacular expression and the indefatigable determination to "keep on going and never turn back and keep on going. . . ." It is more than interesting, more than coincidental, that as an adjective Webster's New World Dictionary defines "vernacular" as belonging to homeborn slaves.

From the beginning slaveholders were plagued by the "disease" that infected their slaves with the alien desire to run away. By 1793 many states began passing laws providing for the capture and punishment of slaves, often stipulating handsome rewards for their return. During the nineteenth century, after the Atlantic Trade was outlawed, the flight of slaves became a serious

threat to the entire plantation system in the South which was now dependent on an internal trade, buttressed largely by plantations, and even whole states, that bred and grew their own slaves. "Runaways," "fugitives," "escapees," "maroons," and "contraband" were terms that put fear and anger in every slaveholder's heart, and initiated freelance "patterollers," hunters and catchers of Negroes. From about 1830 until the end of the Civil War, an unbroken stream of slaves escaped from the South via what had come to be known as the Underground Railroad. The metaphor was inspired by the labyrinthine sundry routes, along which many acts of ingenuity, bravery and sacrifice were transformed into legendary feats of mythological proportions:

> Some go weeping and some rejoicing
> some in coffins and some in carriages
> some in silks and some in shackles.

Ellen Craft was light enough to pass for white; she dressed as a white master and escorted her dark-complexioned husband out of the deep South in clear view of everybody. Henry "Box" Brown acquired his nickname by having himself sealed in a box and shipped aboard a steamer to a northern port. A mother with babe in arms got trapped on a bridge between catchers on either side; rather than be captured she leaped to death in the ice-cold waters. The first play written by a black person, *Leap to Freedom*, was based on the legend that grew out of the incident. "Many Thousand Gone" became a familiar phrase in black cultural lore, and various plays, songs, novels, essays, and even paintings have been entitled with it. During the height of Underground Railroad activity, Congress passed the infamous Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, to little avail. "Catch them if you can, but it won't be easy. / They'll dart underground . . . / plunge into quicksand, whirlpools, mazes, / turn into scorpions when you try to catch them."

The facts, circumstances, and incidents of the Underground Railroad movement, and the mythology, form a vast reservoir of collective memory which — through word of mouth, tales, rhymes, and songs — is passed on from generation to generation. Hay-

den's research took him into that great experiential resource of black folk culture which Richard Wright labeled "The Form of Things Unknown." The entire first part of the poem is composed of words, phrases, song titles, expressions, wanted posters, escaped slave advertisements, all taken from the African-American experiential heritage. "No more auction block for me / no more driver's lash for me / And before I'll be a slave / I'll be buried in my grave" are lines from one of the songs that whites banned the blacks from singing. Hayden is working with the most rudimentary forms and elements of the African-American poetic tradition, which includes call and response, improvisations, polyrhythmic sounds, runs and syncopations, with "bassing" ("Runagate Runagate") as the leitmotif. This tradition is collective rather than individual. There is only one "I" in the entire first part of the poem, and it is a communal "I." The narrative voice is omnipotent and omniscient because it belongs to everybody, to the many thousands who rise and go, who are crossing over. To where — and to what?

> O mythic North
> O star-shaped yonder Bible city

The flight that informs "Runagate Runagate" is not cowardly running away. The "fugitives" are not fleeing from justice because of heinous acts they have committed. The flight of the runagate is anointed by the call of an unimpeachable quest, the quest for Zion — "star-shaped yonder Bible city" — which is North, which is at once reality, symbol, and metaphor (as North represents freedom and South represents slavery). Both the theme and the phenomenon of flight demand of and imbue the fugitives and those who aid them with the grit and valor of the heroic. The above couplet, as well as the lines "before I'll be a slave / I'll be buried in my grave," are heroic. The price of the quest may very well mean death, but the prize is "the" freedom: "the" signifying an already existing quality of life into which one may enter, if only one can reach that "somewhere morning."

Thus, in the final stanza of part I of the poem, "North Star" represents another symbol and metaphor for the reality and mythology of Underground Railroad activity. In 1848 Frederick Douglass named his anti-slavery newspaper *The North Star*. The Ghanian shipping line is named after the North Star. Marcus Garvey's back-to-Africa fleet, as well as many more Negro and African enterprises, were named in honor of the North Star. Equated with bonanza gold, the North Star is the compass star by which the runaways steered the train to keep on track. The powerfully understated irony of the line from the Negro song, "oh Susyanna don't you cry for me," is not that they are going to Louisiana with a banjo on their knees, but that the runagates are bound for the freedom, "freedom-bound." The hyphenation of "freedom-bound" puts an unbreakable seal on the fugitive's commitment to the quest for freedom, which is precious and valued more than bonanza gold:

> North star and bonanza gold
> I'm bound for the freedom, freedom-bound
> and oh Susyanna don't you cry for me
> Runagate
> Runagate

When we come to the second part of Hayden's poem, we realize that the first part is a rather elaborate exposition, a portrayal of the collective experience in a general context. It relies on and emphasizes the communal voice and lore, wherein, along with their collective secular and sacred heritage of signs, symbols, songs, idioms, Biblical allusions, and double meanings, the heroic is the folk, and the will and deeds of the collective slave Underground Railroad community constitute the hero.

Swiftly progressing from the general to the specific, the second part of the poem moves from the anonymity of mass folk experience to the singling out of a particular individual. Now the individual becomes the hero and her deeds are the heroic. In 1829 a bounty was placed on the life of David Walker for publishing his

incendiary anti-slavery pamphlet, the *Appeal*. His "mysterious" death quickly followed. The next most dangerous person to the slave system was declared to be Harriet Tubman, with rewards ranging from ten to forty thousand dollars, which would be millions today. In the second part of "Runagate," Harriet Tubman is named, her credentials are cited, and she is placed at the center of the Underground Railroad movement. As in real life, in the poem she is larger than life, she is "General," "Moses," "Armed," and "Dangerous." She is "Wanted . . . Dead or Alive."

Again as in real life, Harriet Tubman does not drop out of the sky, she does not descend from Mount Olympus. Rather, she "rises from their anguish and their power." Whose anguish, whose power? The collective anguish and power of the masses of slaves who numbered four million at the onset of the war. Nor was Harriet Tubman a house servant slave, she was a field slave with whip scars on her back, a woman of earth who received a "summoning" from God and became herself a "shining," a visionary and soldier. Though only about five feet in stature, she braved the journey back and forth, in and out of the South dozens of times, freeing hundreds of slaves. Her leitmotif is "mean to be free," signifying unfaltering determination and courage. In the scenario that begins with "and this was the way of it," we witness The General "stealing" slaves, leveling her pistol "glinting in the moonlight"; we see and hear her admonish a discouraged runaway, "Dead folks can't jaybird-talk . . . / you keep on going now or die." Suddenly we get the sensation of the heroic aura of Harriet Tubman retroactively empowering the first part of the poem. "Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into darkness / . . . and keep on going and never turn back and keep on going. . . ."

Come ride-a my train

Hayden was assailed (by others) with the trick question of whether he was a poet or a Negro poet. This is the albatross around the neck of every African-American writer who has ever lived, as if there is some inherent antipathy between poet and

Negro poet. Obviously Hayden did not recognize or feel any such antipathy. He refused to be limited or ghettoized by others on account of his race; rather, he explored, improvised and expanded the artificial boundaries that both white racism and narrow black nationalism would impose on him and his work. He meticulously worked with the matter and the elements of his heritage, bringing the labor, instinct, skill, talent and dedication of an incredibly hard-working poet to bear on every page he wrote. That is to say, there is nothing new or original in "Runagate Runagate," *except* the genius of Robert Hayden and the genius he recognized in the experiences and aesthetic tradition of African-American people. Lines such as "hound dogs belling in bladed air," "over trestles of dew, through caves of the wish," and "tell me Ezekiel, oh tell me do you see / mailed Jehovah coming to deliver me?" are wrought from exquisitely controlled feelings of poetic passion. Consider the first half of each of the four lines beginning with "Hoot-owl calling in ghosted air":

> Hoot-owl calling to . . .
> five times calling to . . .
> Shadow of a face in . . .
> shadow of a voice in . . .

Now the second half of these same lines:

> the ghosted air,
> the hants in the air.
> the scary leaves,
> the talking leaves.

Then the five lines in italics that are connected to and by the bass (conductor's call) lines before and after, rather like the cars of a train with an engine at the front and one at the rear:

> Come ride-a my train

Oh that train, ghost-story train
through swamp and savanna movering movering,
over trestles of dew, through caves of the wish,
Midnight Special on a sabre track movering movering,
first stop Mercy and the last Hallelujah.

Come ride-a my train

Hayden does what Ellison does in *Invisible Man*. He employs the tools and modes of the African-American oral tradition, right along with the Western intellectual tradition, to create an incredibly rich and moving matrix of meanings. Robert Hayden was a big man, well over six feet with big bone structure and big hands. He was the kindest man I have known, courteous and charitable, and exuded a warmth that only humility can convey. Much like a diamond cutter hovering over his desk with magnifying glass in his eye, he turns uncut stones into icons and signs of precision. From carefully selected words and their structure on the page, he gives us a jewel of precious perfection. But "Runagate Runagate" is more than a mechanical work of art. Brimming with people, places, incidents, bits of songs, lore, and tales, the poem is a living, moving organism. From the first word, "Runs," to the last word, "free," Harriet Tubman's heroic motif is the triple-powered driving force behind the unalterable quest:

mean mean mean to be free.

Wendell Logan

NOTES ON A MUSICAL SETTING OF ROBERT HAYDEN'S "RUNAGATE RUNAGATE"

During the early seventies I stumbled upon Robert Hayden's *Angle of Ascent*. Immediately, I was impressed by the imagery and rhythm of his poetry and knew at once that I would later make musical use of some of it. In 1980, I used his poem "Frederick Douglas" in a kind of theater context, employing a speaker and two small jazz groups. The music was certainly inspired by the poetry, but this was primarily a vehicle for the speaker, whereby the music was an accompaniment and, in this case, secondary to the text: Hayden's words had yet to be directly associated with sounds/rhythms. I continued to read his poetry and was quite fascinated by two of his longer collage poems: "Middle Passage" and "Runagate, Runagate."

During the early eighties I was fortunate to hear the artistry of the now celebrated tenor, William Brown, who suggested that I compose a piece for him. During the summer of 1989, some ideas began to formulate based on a text by Robert Hayden. I contacted Alvin Aubert, editor and publisher of *OBSIDIAN: Black Literature in Review* to obtain a special issue on Hayden. It helped immeasurably in understanding something about Hayden as a person and his motivations and inspirations as a poet. Two other books that were of considerable importance were *From the Auroral Darkness: The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden* by John Hatcher and *Collected Prose: Robert Hayden*, edited by Frederick Glaysher.

After much indecision about which of the two selected pieces I would set, "Middle Passage" or "Runagate, Runagate," I decided that "Runagate, Runagate" was more suitable for my immediate plans. In addition to tenor soloist, the composition is scored for flute/piccolo, clarinet/bass clarinet, piano, percussion, violin, and cello.

The following program note was provided for the premier performance:

"Runagate, Runagate" and other poems from *Angle of Ascent* ("Middle Passage," "O Daedalus," "Fly Away Home," "The Ballad of Nat Turner," and "Frederick Douglas") represent a kind of historical chronicle of the Afro-American journey towards freedom.

My primary concern in attempting a musical setting was to capture some of the poem's inherent musical qualities: the frantic "beat" of the fleeing fugitives, the steady, rumbling "beat" of a train (symbolic of the Underground Railroad); the unmistakable melodic character, often resulting from the repetition of lines and phrases, and the use of lines from spirituals ("Mean mean mean to be free" and "And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave"); and the imagery of the poem, from which sprang many creative ideas about drama, pacing, sound, texture and the like.

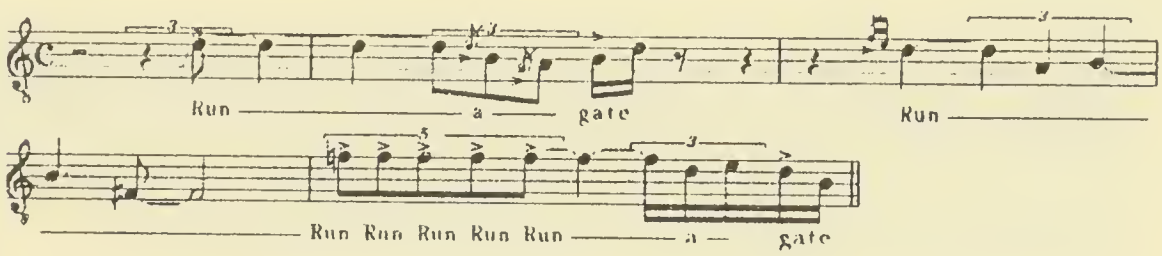
The following discussion examines some of the specific ways that Hayden's poetic ideas were addressed compositionally. For example, the opening section of the poem presents numerous potential paths for compositional exploration: the density and rapid-fire presentation of ideas within a short time span; the high degree of repetition (both immediate and intermittent); and the sense of frantic pacing/movement:

Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into darkness
and the darkness thicketed with shapes of terror
and the hungers pursuing and the hounds pursuing
and the night cold and the night long and the river
to cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beckoning beckoning
and blackness ahead and when shall I reach that somewhere
morning and keep on going and never turn back and keep on
going

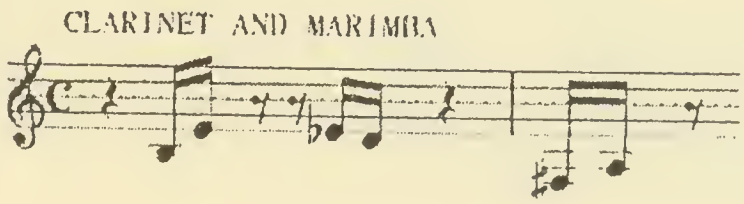
This passage is used to introduce elements that will characterize the musical setting: the frantic quality of the spoken vocal part; the rapid movement of the string material; and the manner in which words and phrases (particularly repeated ones) are accented by the wind and percussion instruments. All were used in attempting to capture something of the dramatic (and explosive) quality of the poem's opening.

For the first of two occurrences of the word *Runagate* (repeated in the poem, three and two times respectively), a quasi melismatic treatment is used. In addition to textual (and syllabic) repetition, a repeated blues-like motive is used in the instrumental accompaniment and interspersed throughout the setting.

Example 1. Vocal Excerpt

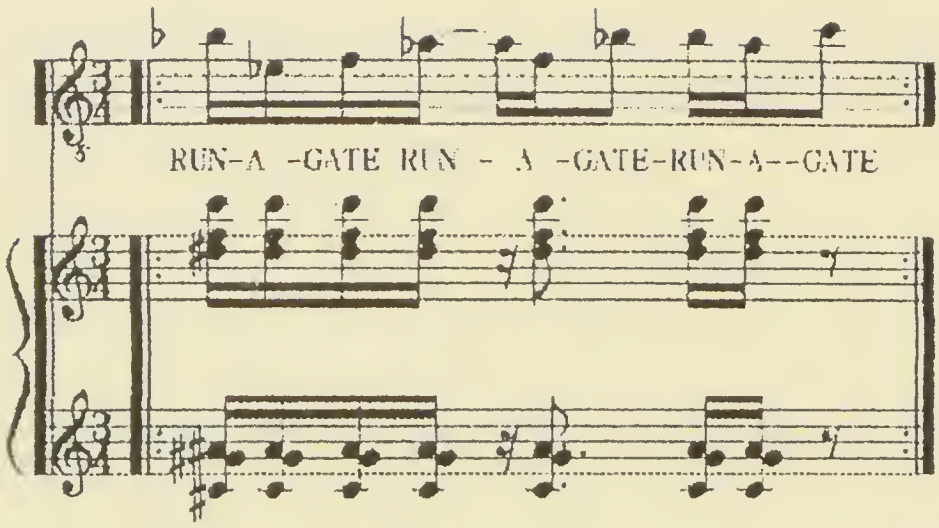


Example 2. Blues-like motivic figure.



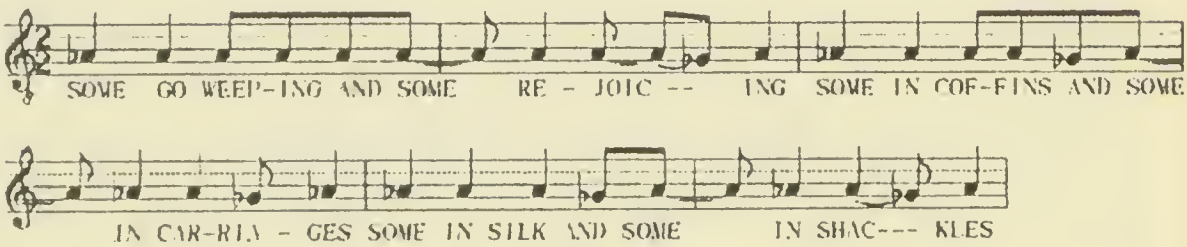
The second setting of the text, *Runagate*, is given a rhythmic/motivic treatment and is pitted against a static harmonic accompaniment.

Example 3.



Here are some additional examples of repetition (modified repetition).

Example 4.



The intent was to accommodate the poetic rhythm as closely as possible:

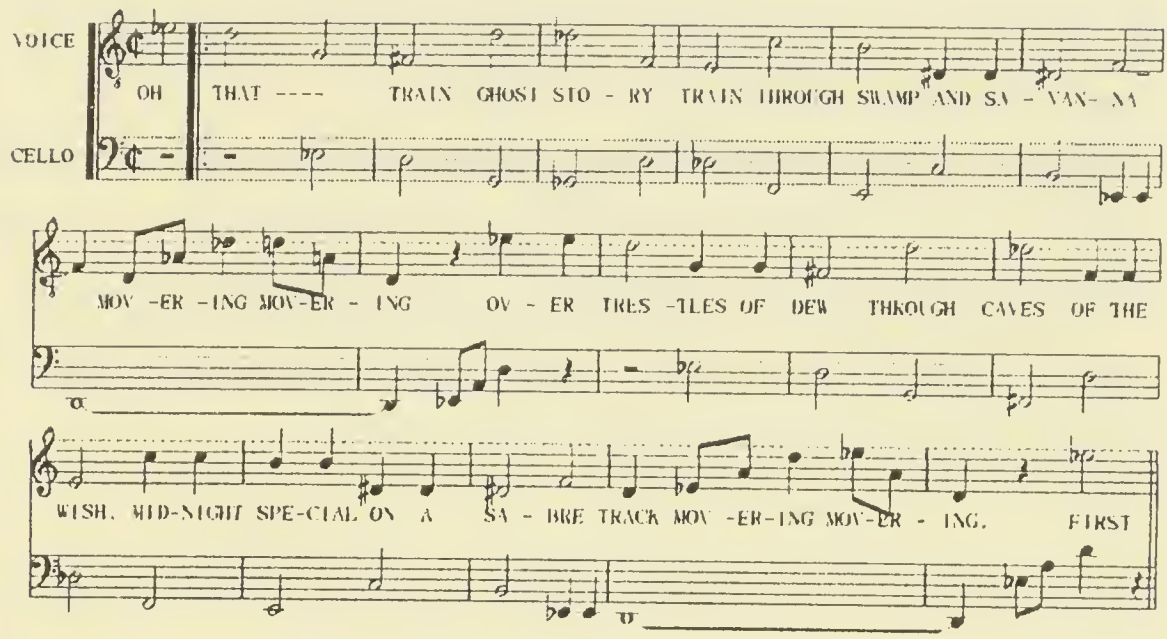
> Some go weeping and some rejoicing
> some in coffins and some in carriages
> some in silks and some in shackles

This idea is developed further in setting the following:

> O that train, ghost-story train
> through swamp and savanna movering movering,
> over trestles of dew, through caves of the wish,
> Midnight Special on a sabre track movering movering,
> first stop Mercy and the last Hallelujah.

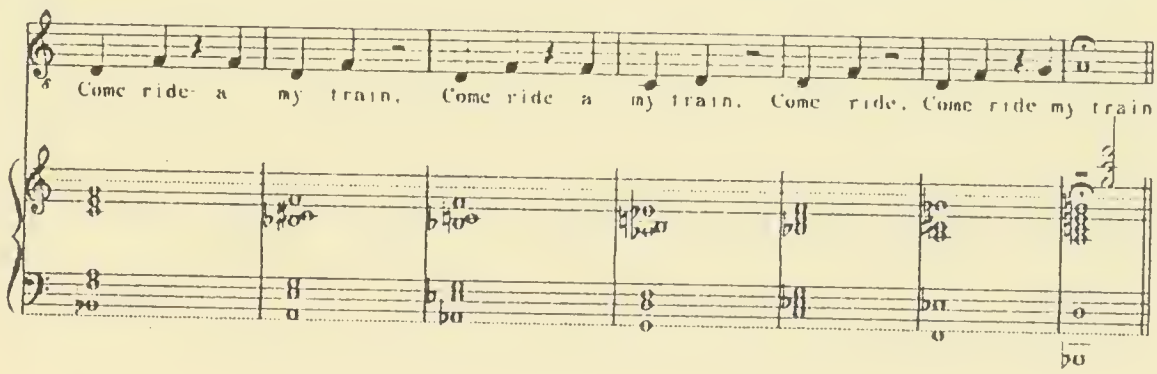
In this instance, a slightly modified strophic form is used, and the voice engages in a canonic dialogue with the cello.

Example 5.



In addition to the above, numerous other examples of repetition can be found, but based on compositional choice rather than the poem itself, for example in the following brief declamatory section:

Example 6.



In the improvisatory section, the vocalist is at liberty to choose the succession of musical events from among a number of options (easily identified by the recapitulation of lines and phrases from previous sections), and in the coda, the textual fragment, "Mean mean mean to be free," is repeated four times.

A final matter of compositional significance is the manner in which frequent shifts in instrumental color, mood, and musical

idea are used to capture some of the poem's inherent qualities. The reader is referred to the musical settings that are associated with the following first lines for examples of the latter: "Rises from their anguish and their power . . ." (frequent shifts in instrumental color and musical idea); "Wanted Harriet Tubman alias The General . . ." (the singer is instructed to assume the role of a street vendor and the speech-song material is pitted against a coloristic instrumental — though harmonically static — accompaniment); and "Hoot-owl calling in the ghosted air . . ." (frequent shifts in mood, instrumental color, and musical idea).

Hayden's poetry is indeed modern in terms of idiom and attitude. As such, it has much to offer contemporary composers of almost any genre of vocal music.

MONET'S WATERLILIES

Today as the news from Selma and Saigon
poisons the air like fallout,
        I come again to see
the serene great picture that I love.

Here space and time exist in light
the eye like the eye of faith believes.
        The seen, the known
dissolve in iridescence, become
illusive flesh of light
        that was not, was, forever is.

O light beheld as through refracting tears.
Here is the aura of that world
        each of us has lost.
Here is the shadow of its joy.

THE EYE OF FAITH

The current perception of Hayden's achievement manifests itself in the inability of many critics and tastemakers to look at *all* of his poems, to let him out of a ghetto, as it were, of 'black' poetry, or more accurately, of a being a black who wrote very well. As Hayden is increasingly included in anthologies, the poems are too often the same four or five 'Black History Month' poems which convey only a sliver of Hayden's wide-ranging skills and interests.

His own words are helpful here: "There's a tendency today — more than a tendency, it's almost a conspiracy — to delimit poets, to restrict them to the politically and the socially or racially conscious. To me, this indicates gross ignorance of the poet's true function as well as of the true function and value of art. . . . I resist whatever would force me into a role as politician, sociologist, or yea-sayer to current ideologies. I know who I am, and pretty much what I want to say."

In the spirit of the foregoing, I have chosen to look at Robert Hayden's poem "Monet's Waterlilies." To my mind, "Waterlilies" is a 'raceless' poem, if such a thing is possible. On its most obvious level, it is a testament from one artist to another. It's interesting that Hayden, a child of the inner city, thought that this painting of a bygone French countryside carried him to some restorative past. Monet fought his entire artistic life for a certain kind of light, what he called the "light that pervades everything," and Hayden found spiritual, psychological and emotional sustenance in the products of those efforts.

Hilton Kramer describes the painting: ". . . a world in which sky and clouds and mists and water-lilies and river grass and willows and underwater flora all converge, unhampered and undivided by horizon lines or by spatial demarcations derived from fixed perspectives. All elements are consumed in their own reflection and counter-reflection on the pond's surface and by their own proliferating refraction in the air above and the water below. As these convergences become more and more intricated, the surfaces of the pictures lose their details. . . . To define this

order we must go beyond these proliferations of light and shade, object and atmosphere, to the vaster subject which pervades these paintings . . . nothing less than the fluidity of experience itself" (*The Age of the Avant-Garde*).

Correlating the citations of "Selma" and "Saigon," we can infer that the "today" of the poem is somewhere in the first half of March, 1965. In the preceding three months, the Selma, Alabama campaign of the civil rights movement had raged through the national media, featuring photos and news footage of a silver-helmeted Sheriff Jim Clark of Selma and his deputies brutalizing black women and children, throwing Martin Luther King in jail, Malcolm X (who would be assassinated two weeks later) making speeches, and badly wounded NBC reporter Richard Valeriani broadcasting his report from a hospital bed.

On March 7, Alabama State Police attacked marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. NBC broke into regular programming to broadcast the carnage. On March 9, white minister James Reeb was killed. That's some of the news from Selma that Hayden was thinking about. The news from Saigon wasn't any more comforting. By that March, the Vietnam conflict had been escalating for several months. In late 1964, the Viet Cong had attacked Bien Hoa, killing five and wounding 76 Americans. In February there was a VC massacre at Pleiku, and a bombing at Qui Nhon which killed 23 young soldiers. At this time, the United States was not an active, or stated, participant in the civil war, and in March 1965, at the same time Selma was in chaos, the VC bombed the American Embassy in downtown Saigon, killing 20, Marines landed at Da Nang, Operation Rolling Thunder — the saturation bombing of North Vietnam — commenced, and theater commander William Westmoreland requested 300,000 combat troops.

These were the public events Robert Hayden carried in his mind as he walked into the Museum of Modern Art; we'll assume it was a brisk, clear late winter afternoon. Hayden is explicit about the turmoil events thousands of miles away were causing him. His choice of the word "fallout" drags in the third public crisis of that time, the constant possibility of nuclear conflict. In two clear and deceptively offhand lines, Hayden has positioned

the poem squarely at the center of the three consuming moral dilemmas of the day.

Hayden was a member of the Baha'i faith, which emerged in the mid-19th century in Iran. Its adherents are non-violent and believe that humanity is 'young,' slowly maturing toward an egalitarian world order built on the elimination of prejudice and superstition. Baha'is strive to "see" clearly; sight, vision and, most importantly, light, are the constant metaphors of their religious texts. It can be argued that looking at this "serene great picture" was a religious experience for Hayden. Monet's work became a shrine of art and light into which he could retreat. Human evil, for him, was the result of misunderstanding the continuum of space, time and light, the seamless universe that all humans are equally a part of. He believed in one ultimate light, a light that was explained by physics as composed of all the colors of the spectrum, for him an appealing metaphor. Looking at Monet's painting, Hayden was able to view this light with his "eye of faith" and be restored. He describes this transformation explicitly in the second stanza. "Iridescence," strictly defined, is the partial reflection of white light. Hayden was able to stand in front of Monet's painting and be carried, emotionally, from the painting itself and from his psychic distress, through "flesh of light" (in a beautiful phrase) to a timeless state, the original state, Eden.

And there we find Hayden in the final stanza, grieving and miles from Eden:

> O light beheld as through refracting tears.
> Here is the aura of that world
> each of us has lost.
> Here is the shadow of its joy.

The "lost world" of the poem can be childhood, worldly innocence, or simply good memories, but it is a place that "time" has carried us through "space" away from, irrevocably. For a moment, in the presence of great and redemptive art, a "shadow of its joy" can be revisited and reclaimed.

Read in this fashion, "Monet's Waterlilies" stands as a state-

ment of lyric feeling in the tradition of "Lines Composed Above Tintern Abbey" and "Dover Beach," a romantic mixture of idealization and lament. It belongs equally to the American tradition of Whitman and Stevens, blending humanitarian concerns with metaphysical explorations. And it suggests the larger context in which Hayden's work must be viewed if his achievement is to be fully understood and appreciated.

(AMERICAN JOURNAL)

here among them the americans this baffling
multi people extremes and variegations their
noise restlessness their almost frightening
energy how best describe these aliens in my
reports to The Counselors

disguise myself in order to study them unobserved
adapting their varied pigmentations white black
red brown yellow the imprecise and strangering
distinctions by which they live by which they
justify their cruelties to one another

charming savages enlightened primitives brash
new comers lately sprung up in our galaxy how
describe them do they indeed know what or who
they are do not seem to yet no other beings
in the universe make more extravagant claims
for their importance and identity

like us they have created a veritable populace
of machines that serve and soothe and pamper
and entertain we have seen their flags and
foot prints on the moon also the intricate
rubbish left behind a wastefully ingenious
people many it appears worship the Unknowable
Essence the same for them as for us but are
more faithful to their machine-made gods
technologists their shamans

oceans deserts mountains grain fields canyons
forests variousness of landscapes weathers
sun light moon light as at home much here is
beautiful dream like vistas reminding me of
home item have seen the rock place known
as garden of the gods and sacred to the first

indigenes red monoliths of home despite
the tensions i breathe in i am attracted to
the vigorous americans disturbing sensuous
appeal of so many never to be admitted

something they call the american dream sure
we still believe in it i guess an earth man
in the tavern said irregardless of the some
times night mare facts we always try to double
talk our way around and its okay the dreams
okay and means whats good could be a damn sight
better means every body in the good old u s a
should have the chance to get ahead or at least
should have three squares a day as for myself
i do okay not crying hunger with a loaf of
bread tucked under my arm you understand i
fear one does not clearly follow i replied
notice you got a funny accent pal like where
you from he asked far from here i mumbled
he stared hard i left

must be more careful item learn to use okay
their pass word okay

crowds gathering in the streets today for some
reason obscure to me noise and violent motion
repulsive physical contact sentinels pigs
i heard them called with flailing clubs rage
and bleeding and frenzy and screaming machines
wailing unbearable decibels i fled lest
vibrations of the brutal scene do further harm
to my metabolism already over taxed

The Counselors would never permit such barbarous
confusion they know what is best for our sereni
ty we are an ancient race and have outgrown
illusions cherished here item their vaunted

liberty no body pushes me around i have heard
them say land of the free they sing what do
they fear mistrust betray more than the freedom
they boast of in their ignorant pride have seen
the squalid ghettoes in their violent cities
paradox on paradox how have the americans
managed to survive

parades fireworks displays video spectacles
much grandiloquence much buying and selling
they are celebrating their history earth men
in antique uniforms play at the carnage whereby
the americans achieved identity we too recall
that struggle as enterprise of suffering and
faith uniquely theirs blonde miss teen age
america waving from a red white and blue flower
float as the goddess of liberty a divided
people seeking reassurance from a past few under
stand and any scorn why should we sanction
old hypocrisies thus dissenters The Counse
lors would silence them

a decadent people The Counselors believe i
do not find them decadent a refutation not
permitted me but for all their knowledge
power and inventiveness not yet more than raw
crude neophytes like earthlings everywhere

though i have easily passed for an american in
bankers grey afro and dashiki long hair and jeans
hard hat yarmulka mini skirt describe in some
detail for the amusement of The Counselors and
though my skill in mimicry is impeccable as
indeed The Counselors are aware some thing
eludes me some constant amid the variables
defies analysis and imitation will i be judged
incompetent

america as much a problem in metaphysics as
it is a nation earthly entity an iota in our
galaxy an organism that changes even as i
examine it fact and fantasy never twice the
same so many variables

exert greater caution twice have aroused
suspicion returned to the ship until rumors
of humanoids from outer space so their scoff
ing media voices termed us had been laughed
away my crew and i laughed too of course

confess i am curiously drawn unmentionable to
the americans doubt i could exist among them for
long however psychic demands far too severe
much violence much that repels i am attracted
none the less their variousness their ingenuity
their élan vital and that some thing essence
quiddity i cannot penetrate or name

JOURNEY INTO "(AMERICAN JOURNAL)"

In 1975, after years of admiring such poems as "The Ballad of Sue Ellen Westerfield," "Night, Death, Mississippi," and "Homage to the Empress of the Blues," I was fortunate to meet the formidable Robert Hayden. After his Friday-night reading at Colorado College in Colorado Springs, we made plans to meet Saturday afternoon.

I had no idea what I'd say to him. A barrage of elusive questions plagued me throughout the night. The next day I phoned Alex Blackburn, the founding editor of *Writers Forum*, and asked him if he wished to meet Hayden. Alex was elated, and I got off the hook. That afternoon we visited the Garden of the Gods.

Of course, years later, when Michael S. Harper gave me a copy of Hayden's *American Journal* in early 1981, I was surprised by the title poem. I remember how it rekindled sensations and images of that Colorado afternoon; I read the poem repeatedly, each time feeling Hayden's presence intensifying. The man had a penetrating, indecorous eloquence — so does his poetry. I felt linked to this poem personally. "(American Journal)" taught me how language and imagination can transform a physical landscape into a spiritual one. We had talked about how the Garden of the Gods parallels a moonscape, something otherworldly. It was from there that Hayden began to orbit his imaginative tableau. Where many of us would have written a realistic narrative to recreate that day as we gazed out at the rocky formations called Kissing Camels and Balanced Rock, as myriads of birds flashed in the high reddish crevices, Hayden's poem took a leap into the fantastic — a risk. It is a voyage from the known to an approximated unknown that resonates with an almost-observed realism. It seems as if the narrator is on a spiritual quest, that this voyage into the brutal frontier of the American experience is a confrontation with his own alienation. He is transported through the power of reflection (the mind as spacecraft) in order to arrive at the scary truth of his species.

The poem's syntax suggests that everything is fused by a

stream of consciousness — people, situations, ideas. Its satire is enhanced because numerous contradictions coexist, a tabulation of positives and negatives that insinuate: "new comers lately sprung up in our galaxy . . . yet no other beings / in the universe make more extravagant claims / for their importance and identity." The crude, egotistical Americans are attractive and repulsive; they are redeemable only if they can name their crimes and insanities, or if someone can speak on their behalf — a seer, a poet, or a Christ-like sympathizer. The poem's fractured syntax also highlights the narrator's alienation, as if spoken by a foreigner striving to grasp the structure and nuances of a new language.

Indeed, the "humanoid" amongst us narrates as might an early Western anthropologist, descending into the wilds of his galaxy to do fieldwork. He uses outdated jargon — "charming savages" and "enlightened primitives" — to describe us. Of course, this is the same ethnocentric lingo used by early anthropologists to dehumanize various peoples throughout the world. The narrator, however, employs the oxymorons in a satirical, almost cynical way, to articulate the supreme contradiction of our culture, the American Dream.

After interviewing an "earth man" at a tavern, who maintains he still believes in the dream, "irregardless of the some / times night mare facts we always try to double / talk our way around," the narrator, after further investigation of our society, records the American Dream as a great lie — a cultural materialism based on illusions and paradoxes. The idea that "every body in the good old u s a / should have the chance to get ahead . . . three squares a day" pales under the narrator's witnessing of "the squalid ghettoes in their violent cities." Like a mortified anthropologist, the narrator renames our dream as "vaunted liberty," and typically compares America with the more evolved society from which he travelled: "we are an ancient race and have outgrown / illusions cherished here."

As an outsider himself, he is able to ridicule this illusion, orchestrated by our mythmakers, because he, a "humanoid," like

others who are physically or culturally "different," are not welcomed into American society, let alone given access to the means of attaining the Dream. The narrator can only exist in the American context if he prostitutes his individuality through "mimicry" and assimilation: "though i have easily passed for an american . . . exert greater caution twice have aroused / suspicion returned to the ship." The speaker is raceless, without gender or genus, but knows this fearful sense of otherness that had driven most Americans into the psychological melting pot.

The narrator speaks as an insider / outsider, a freak in an elastic limbo, whose sensitivity is violated by "unbearable decibels." This investigator knows the impending tragedy programmed by America's love of technology — its machine-oriented existence: "more faithful to their machine-made gods / technologists their shamans." Similarly, he records the cultivated national ignorance that protects and facilitates America's collective ego: "earth men / in antique uniforms play at the carnage whereby / the americans achieved identity."

Is the poet an anthropologist also? Are we responsible for what we witness? Perhaps the speaker is also an artist, one who must not only record the patterns of the universe one finds oneself in, but decode, translate and critique them also. In any case, for me, this poem gains more and more authority and significance as the last piece in Hayden's *Collected Poems*. It is a perfect summation and coda to his career as a poet. He always saw himself and his work as totally *American*. Yet, I believe he identifies with the displaced speaker in "(American Journal)" — the outsider.

AUTOSUGGESTION: USS NORTH CAROLINA

And that is the largest battleship in the world, I said.
And see how small it really is. Isn't that encouraging?
She pointed her head toward the drinking fountain,
but was having none of it. A dog from the mental ward
hopped over her. We had driven all the way to Surf City
for some peace and, it's not as though it eluded us
so much as it did circle us. The pelicans were on display.
They did pelican-like dives into the surf and came up
wanting bit parts in a movie other than ours.
We were surprisingly graceful, and called Pest Control.
That whole day was like a dream leaking into our satchel.
It was stained permanently, but so attractive
we couldn't have designed it better, and we knew nothing
about design. The battleship seemed stalled forever,
or it was a little intimidated by its own reputation.
Whatever the case, we held the idea of a torpedo
gingerly in our minds and meandered, without launching it.
Most of the natives were under house-arrest.
They wore ankle bracelets and watched us from their windows
or monitors. We couldn't go any father than this.
We were touring our Armed Forces here and there.
Some of the ammo felt moldy. The Officers, though,
were made of steel, soft and pliable,
like stuffed animals. They wet their beds — that seemed
to be the unifying principle. But what did we know?
We were rank amateurs. We were poseurs of the worst sort.
We were out of our league. We belonged in little league
uniforms, but we couldn't afford them, and our sponsors
were idiots and dunces and drifters and no-count
amalgamated mud merchants. This left us free of debt
and free of riches, which can be so heavy to transport.
We were airy and free and broke and lost
figure skaters or trigger fish, whatever.
And whenever one of the ships felt like sinking
we just picked up magazines and pretended to read

about something else, like a migraine headache
discovered still pounding inside a 10,000 year old
snowman holding up the North Pole. Incredible! we'd say.
And, who could believe in that? 35,000 tons of history,
going, going — so long. Next, we are going to visit
planets of the solar system, like Burma and Senegal.
But the Department of Housing and Urban Development
says there is heartache and neuralgia starting to blossom there,
but also hydroponics is being discovered.
We have decided to travel by hydroplane,
though, sadly, there is no water anywhere as yet.

WHAT A PATIENT DOES

I follow the tinkle of the lead llama's bell,
a shadow in the memory of man, while maintaining
a strict radio silence. I could see a Chieftain
on a hill surveying ancient ruins.
The breath of leaves and moss and green daylight,
a stray pig snapping at his ankles.
From the tar-pit of the obvious I did nothing.
I maintained a strict radio silence, humming.
Flocks of beetles settled on the leaves of tangerine trees.
A tiny ladybird beetle dreamed I was its loyal ally.
To my right is a man reading on a rock.
He thinks he has renounced the world, but there he is,
occupying a little space. An empty chair beside him
has another idea. It is rocking to and fro.
I tell myself: I'll move like water over this undergrowth.
And then I draw back and hold my breath. Something
I've never seen before: a pig breaking in two.
Fingers of lightning flash. The llama looks
very much like a sheep with a long neck. Its head
is a cloud of dust and gas located among the stars.

Only fly-specks remain.
I have not a thought in my head.
My head is a giant pumpkin with a thousand legs.
That must be the elusive thought I was after.
I am feeling a degree of relief and even confidence
after that exercise. Now I remember December 22, 1935.
A bunch of young officers, including yours truly,
met in a restaurant in Shinjuku to discuss a plot.
That's all I remember. The communal spirit
of the valley drifted away. Maybe it was sad.
Then again it might have been a great joke.
I was going to publish *A Secret History,*
but I lost it or it got stolen, perhaps in a subway.
These days I relish a second opinion.
Could there have been another, a better war?
I think I was the one who ran away, who climbed a tree
and then another tree, and then the last one.
I was suffering from postnatal insanity.
I ran into the Matuya Department Store and said
to the pretty young salesgirl, "Your papa and I
thank you from the bottom of our hearts!"
She started to giggle, and then a few tears eked out
and I sat down on the floor exhausted.
It felt like 1945, like everything was finished.
I remember at some point I had leeches on my face.
An American soldier offered to remove them.
I thought, it's too soon to harvest them,
they'll get much bigger. The Hotel Kaijo was occupied.
I was wishing I could sit on top
of The Five Stories pagoda in Ueno Park
as in the first days when I had no thoughts.
Once I sat on the toilet in the lobby
of the wrestling amphitheater for several hours
astonished that this was my life, my only life,

and I had nothing better to do than sit there.
I didn't care even a little bit about wrestling
and I thought that made me some kind of freakish monster.
If someone had walked in on me and said, "Excuse me,
but would you like to join me for some Wakame seaweed from
Naruto
cooked with new bamboo shoots and leaf buds?
Perhaps we can solve a few of those riddles
so troubling to young persons like yourself,"
I might have bitten his nose. I was a wild animal
without a soul or a home or a name.
And now I see it wasn't a stage I was going through.
That stage, that stageless stage, was my home
and my name and my soul, and the maze of years
and the endless palaver, the well-wishing
like a blue smoke circling, the world-order
tilting this way and that, the extinct species
coming back to haunt, the rice birds and the butterflies
circling and disappearing, O I longed for one firm
handshake and a kick in the butt I could understand.
A terribly pretty snake stared into my one good eye
and I said this is something I can understand.
After a while I hung it from my neck
and went waltzing with the devil on Asakusa Show Street.
That's when we dreamed up the war to kill
this boredom and its hallowed tradition of proscribed behavior.
Soon everyone would be hanging themselves from the gaslights
and cackling with otherworldly delight.
A child played a lute with such purity of sound
streetcars stopped to applaud.
And a horse made a speech praising the damned.
These are my memories, a white Navy Hospital,
a kiss outside the British Embassy.

LANDSCAPE PAINTER, SALMON CREEK, JULY

While deep water doesn't need thick paint,
still it is possible the marsh-side willows
covet the little easel, its natty body
named for onagers and donkeys, its poise
at once patient and frisky. And all the places
it's had its back to! But is the painter really there
to listen to the water lap? Within
that stranger: all unpainted lives, all squirming things.
And an emollient of color won't hurt; the scene
is all over his body, his bones an easel
(sun lotion and paint can't
be so different, he may hope).

Then mountain and estuary toss him about,
saying work work work
before all is forever dry.
One gold smeared everywhere
for tree lupine, gumweed, mustard, lotus —
it would drive you mad if your body
didn't next wipe white around,
then blue. And if your body didn't shadow
minnows in the marsh-plant roots,
deepen even this refreshed tidal world
a little too.

ODE TO BARON SAMEDI AND OTHER GUÉDÉS

I

Banner-foot, fishtail-foot,
swimming in your tuxedo
through the filmy dusk graveyard,
your rood rarefies to serpent-tongues,
candles, and protective stars,
entertains skulls without eyebrows,
one cranium jet with octopus eyes.

Gold Guédé with bowler,
shining in light from a bullion snake,
your crypt cross natty as a closet of vests,
your vest spruce as crossbones —
what an elegant helper
down the single stair.

II

You're not out sniffing for cruelty tonight,
only its consequence. Hmmm,

if nothing's happening on the streets with your friends
you'll pick up a book, one expired
telephone directory will do.
An old phone book is one long elegy.
You look for the good-time number
of Death's widow.

III

Morticians from Duluth — who'd have thought
we'd spend vacation with them?
Camped in a body at Leech Lake,
they uncased their instruments,

played upbeat so we danced each night.
Their wives taller, wider than they,
playpens' corrals picketing the lakeshore,
they shared a crate of cheapest brandy.
I played along one time, on the electric piano
short on octaves, fragile diminutive highs
and groveling pitches in the depths.
I played along with happy undertakers.

IV

I did not plainly moan my birthfather
until the middle hours of Halloween.
I was silvered to the wig-line
and appalling the ceremonious children
as best I could — at least they backed away
from my handbonesful of sweets.

It is a most holy day;
I set up a small shrine for the dead
to return (whenever) to, two Dia
de los Muertos sculptures
(a blue-haired fleshless writer
and a shrunken honeymoon couple in a mirrored
cut-away suite, dead black rooster on the bed),
three squares of divinity,
and a dwarf sea of mercurial light —
a shotglass upholding memorial vodka.
I liked being recast by the costume.
Something said, then, You really *are*
changed, this deep color-absence you wear
in fun is *real* mourning, you are going,
now, as a witch to mourn
one passionate cause of your being.

And a small mist of laments
stood out slow and balked
on the iron and aluminum cheek-smear
mined, mixed, and greased
for horror.

V

The joke they told to consummate Rabinowitz's wake
has versions to infinity,
depending on which bloodline you're born to.
Michael and Clarence told two,
American Black rendition and one for American Jews.

Who you are grants the last words,
whatever they're called, the punchline.

And not even death changes the joke.
But it is death which locates
the flesh for the laugh.

Note: The Guédé (or Ghede) family of Haitian *vodoun* spirits of death includes Baron Samedi, the Lord of the Cemetery.

SPIRIT WRITINGS

Murry wants to write; he loves the glyph flood of written speech; he cannot read; he invents a graceful script anyway, with watercolor; his paintings are this way verbal and liquid; they present shapes of ghosts, washes for bodies; he reinvents the ghostwriter; his spirits' eyes are important — those who can't see he puts glasses on; he has inspected cursive and found it divine —full of intimation, moment, forbidding paraphrase. He feels God gives him

the gift to write, which mortals denied him; he has a great deal to say with his writing, pages to soak; where did he receive the annunciation ordaining him to lace streaming spiritual bodies with marchings that look like sentences; he says it is not his idea; he has the confidence of an ancient still-in-progress calligrapher who writes poems down the side of paintings; of Wang Wei, who monochromed, doubly, landscapes and poems; a feeling like that of the scroll of the moment hung in the alcove of a Zen tearoom.

This sheet looks like columns in a daily, with backrush rill forms, spreading delta channels; seems to represent many reportings, lots to speak out about; what needs to be styled into tablets, paper as well as stone; it is a violet-letter New Testament; Ghost with Glasses, Ghost with Orange Aura; faint thistle fingerprint — Murry's; no feet — a cross indicates a haint's body is

finishing. Murry can't read his Bible. Murry reads spirits. A cat will, abruptly, directly, step up to the spirit painting, stretch her belly along the drawn-out dissipation of the amethyst spirit's shape and paw (stained-glass-window-shaped paw) over and over the silken face of the demon (you can see where the dust is gone on the glass door to this closet of paper robes). The wraiths — there are four — respond with a strong stare. One has just left the fire to rippling backlight, without yet burning out.

God is going to put the written paintings together in a book. No changes to the text will be made. No proof marks will scratch the copy. The book will be bound, the writing be in color. The faces readable through fluid paragraphs will be orange, yellow, grape. The book will put readers in one binding with that which is read. The pages will be heavy like tatting, starched, the white showing through. The covers will be moss on laminations of bark. The book will come with a bottle

of water from Murry's well. The water will translate the chapters as it magnifies, as it slides along amplifying, preaching. It is not a novel; it is unfeigned utterance, import. There is neither first conflict nor denouement. Murder — the power of the lost — won't whole this birth. The mystery's detective dissolves on the horsehair and color crystals of deduction. The message seeks no ending, middle to middle. The handwriting of the on-and-on. Tongues. Language. Lord.

Note: J. B. Murry (1908-1988) was an African-American mystical visionary artist, a native of Georgia.

VILLAGE SONG

and suddenly life
on my poor plate
a lean piece of celestial pork
here on my plate

to observe me
to observe you
or to kill a fly without malice
to annihilate the light
or to make it

make it
like one who opens her eyes and elects
a brimming sky
on the empty plate

rubens onions tears
more rubens more onions
more tears

so many histories
black indigestible miracles
and the eastern star
immured
and the bone of love
so gnawed and so hard
gleaming on another plate

this hunger itself
exists
it is the longing of the soul
which is the body

it is the rose of grease
aging
in its sky of meat

mea culpa turbid eye
mea culpa black mouthful
mea culpa divine nausea

there is no other here
on this empty plate
except me
devouring my eyes
and yours

translated by Stephanie Anderson

ICEBOATS

Out of such icy darkness
who has called them?
Shadow flowers,
white kings,
citadels of breath
chiseled on a pane
by that quick gentle killing thing —
the frost's chill fire.

Pale endeavors
of our wannest henchmen,
elbow of nothing,
Gloucestor's pearls,
life's frozen decrescendo — a white pitcher
pouring forever
into a porcelain bowl.

Listen,
the king's singers are ruled by fear
yet the melody lingers
like illness or
a white telephone
in a white room blankly ringing, ringing . .

Look,
how isolate
& bravely now
through the keyhole of time they sail
the oblique light
of their vanishing — iceboats at dawn,
shadows swanned on snow.

THE SHOES ARE DEATH

Dim dimming dimmer
A blind man follows stepping stones
To a place where the ghost of categories rests
Beneath its cloak of many colors

This is the branching way
World in a backward look
Here the furious trees
Shake their fists at the stars
& all the words are named after somebody's mother

Yet the artifice ends in not knowing when
To stop to go on
You stop you go on again
Azure . . . measure . . . beige . . . garage . . .

The discernible difference is less
Than the wavering shade
On the porch of evening fades
From the grasp of one in whose debt we are left
Although he is deaf to it

THE PUNISHED NET

All bad things come in a continuum.
The man who moved the moon to Wichita.
This wall of thinking bricks.
Disappointment in machines.
Yet there is a world of difference between
what goes without saying,
stepping stones across a stream,
& the mailman's slow program for pain.
Raising an arm on the arm-farm you notice
a window onto the metaphysical stage
shows lawlike relations of water & smoke
putting flames of the flowers out.
& as the red separation begins to work
names evaporate. The good news is
we are on the verge of something so vast
nothing's not in it.
In hideous parody of memory
clouds of jellyfish drift from the periphery
toward nightmare marinas,
coral reefs of the cumulative shore.
The rest is too sad for words.
Like a brain in a jar.
Turning to your nearest neighbor you say,
The shanty people erected cathedrals of light
& we have planted a piece of mind in the sky.
Now the stars talk to us.
Still I am tired of apologizing for the weather.
When something breaks I want it out of the house.
Why are you crying in the rain?

SPINAL CORD

Solomon's flute in elastic ivory,
the organ pipes
of the white Aurora Borealis,
the singing of dolphins and sirens,
crest of a blind
cave
fish.

Braided white
Christmas loaf of nerves,
irregular Latin verbs
in place of mystery.

The computer's anthology of tenderness
in Pascal.

Enclosed, as always,
in the black rings
of a vertebra,
    a vertebra,
      a vertebra,

because otherwise,
immaculate or not,
we'd all be paralyzed
right after birth.

MY MOTHER LEARNS SPANISH

She started at the age
of eighty-two. She falls asleep
each time, page 26.
Algo se trama.

The pencil that underlines verbs
sets out on the page reluctantly
tracing the delicate outlines
of death.
No hay necesidad de respuestas.

It draws the routes
of Vasco de Gama's voyages.
It draws El Greco's eye.
It draws Picasso's fish,
too big for its own aquarium.

A pencil as stubborn
as Fuente Ovejuna.
As the bull in the arena,
Plaza de Toros Monumental,
already on its knees,
while horses wait
to drag away its body.

No hay necesidad de respuestas,
no answers are needed.
Now or ever.
She sleeps
ever now.

While Gaudi
as if in homage
never completes
his cathedral,
Sagrada Familia.

translated by Dana Hábová and David Young

ON GIVING MY FATHER A BOOK ABOUT ROSES

Only child, he draws a child
upon a horse within a house upon a
— horse/house/hoarse — globby
thicket of graphite on graphite
piling up into a gawky rose

whose pistil the child lifts
— yellow pencil as thick as a horse's leg —
and draws that child who draws
that child who draws that
drawing child.

If he had had a brother
to remind him to move the pencil.
If he had had a horse, his own
large, large-eyed thing on whom

nothing is lost.
But that is what the rose is.
The rose on page one,
page one of the book
I gave him an hour ago.

Now he concentrates so hard
on this page he doesn't remember having seen
that the rose is a thicket of flesh-petals
breaking the tan soil of his brow.

And this hour spent talking of roses,
the one out in the trunk, concrete half of the gift,
of how we would plant it according to the book
on the sun-bleached side of his new "assisted" dwelling

You can have back this rose,
you big Universe Bud whose shuttlecock-face
probes the dark interplanetary dirt.
You can have back the book, Cosmic Bookstore.

But when you excise this hour from his mind
— and me in that hour, and the small, coherent
splice of talk about roses,
I may not be able to forgive.

His face blooms scarlet,
his chin darts down for shade
as he has to ask my name

the way you have to re-ask the fancy names of roses
not because you weren't listening but because
you don't happen to have a head for roses.

How frightening to find,
an hour later, on your lawn,
— an hour later than *what*? —
the splayed gloves, sharp-edged shovel, the
earth itself in a body-sized bag.

What
was somebody going to plant there
(did he plant me knowing what I was?)

and do I own up to the book about roses
now that the giving
rattles in his brain like an extra star
the ones who're science-smart, or dead,
already know *is* dead?

The drawn rose was always dead.
But it was the one that, pointing to the page,

we had agreed to plant.
I had agreed to plant.

May all the tiny grimbled-up lives
in this diatomaceous earth
shore up our storybook rose.

May its roots hoof out of their burlap sock,
may it raise up its apricot-blaze brain,

and may he remember what it is so he can water it,
or, if he can't,
may the rain remember to rain.

GRACKLES

The already-dead quit answering
and commence to send in grackles, black
floaters at my vision's edge
between *want* and *I want.*
What has my father tired of

that makes him want to go there
and be punched out in the v-shape
a child draws for any
distant bird until the blue sky blooms
with crowded crayoned crotches?

My father brims with cells.
Sex is what's undone him
and what, they say, needs carving out.
It is the biggest grackle.
It struts, it caws, it knows.

Strutted. Cawed out. Knew.
Now in a white bucket.
Now swung down to the lab.
Henceforth he is his percentages:
After blahblah months the chance of blah is blah . . .

Was it the *noise* of birds, the creaking
kitchen beaks?
What made the winged chair hold him?
Are birds what made him tired
all the evenings of his life?

And should I change my name? I was willing
to strap on the wings, myself —
But then this grackle racket,
this sound sun bounces off of,
this thing he tried to say

and walked off the street into Bellevue
    and asked for a good shrink to say it to
and when she didn't work, another.
    (What voices in the kitchen,
what stew bird in the pot?)

    Holier Father, listen.
Lately he does not rise.
    He wants to take the chair with him
in case there aren't enough,
    he wants

to bring the deep plush wings
    that caught
the head that lost track
    of the body that wanted
to cry like these cries.

THE FALLS

He reached out
a long arm
and grasped the hem of my undershirt.
It seemed to happen slowly, almost
casually,
the small child floating away
from the shore of the river, the father angling
an elegant arm out and hooking
the tail-tip of her undershirt
just before she enters the vector
that sucks to the center and hurtles to the head
of the falls. We were in a river in the air,
a celestial river — I did not know
they hated each other, yet, and the current
whisked my feet up gently off the bottom, I
began to make my own way
away from the family, and my father stretched
a shapely lean arm and plucked me
back. I don't know if the falls was
Yosemite or Bridalveil
or Nevada, but I could have been
their middle child who died. I would have
bobbed to the middle and been rushed to the curved
edge of the world. And then, in a braid of
whitewater or of crushive air
gone down to the roar. It shocks me how glad
I am her mouth did not fill with water,
her heart stop
mid-falls
in shock, her shin-bone tibia radius
fibula crack, I love her little
skull, I cherish it, I caress it
with my palm. And I love that young father

who easily slowly snatched her back
to her place, dead center in that family.
No one would have sung of them.
They would have died unknown — and they would have
preferred that, but my sperm king
fished me back, and gave me to my mother to
strip and towel-dry, to burnish.

THE ELOPEMENT

It was raining upwards, sideways, each
tree bursting with rain like brilliant
sweat. We stopped at a country store
to ask where we could get married. There were vats
of pickles, barrels of square yellow crackers —
the Prop. gave you the local J.P.'s
number. I think it was raining in there
while you talked to him, a delicate mist
of brine and cracker-salt. He wanted us
married in a church. While you called his minister
I wandered in the dark, store
air, like a cloud past the vertebrate tin
architecture of the cans. The shelves and
floor and roof and counter were old
wood, there must have been mice in the building,
rats, a cat, roaches, beetles,
and, in the barrel, whatever makes water
pickle, the mother of vinegar, it was a
spore Eden, a bestiary, the
minister said yes, come right on over — but
maybe we were married there, by
matter, by the pickles, by the crackers, by the balls of
dust — Keats' ghost our priest, the rats
looking away like the cows in the manger
around the creche, though there's always one who
knows what's going on, opens her
glowing eyes and gazes, one
rat, transfixed by mortal coupling
grabs the Dutch Girl cocoa tin in his
arms and spins her in a wild waltz
then all the witnesses waltzed, the Campbell's-soup
twins, the Gerber baby, Aunt
Jemima, Betty Crocker, the Sun Maid

raisin girl, the oats Quaker,
the chef of Cream of Wheat, every
good mild family guest
cavorted at our marriage, cloudy ions in the
cucumber-barrel spiraled, your very
sperm swam in tandem, in water
-ballet, the spores of the sky burst and
whirled on our wedding day.

LOVE LETTUCE

The Boston lettuce sprawled
in its bed, it wouldn't come to a head.

But the flowers were working,
their little systems of he and she,

pistils poised, anthers moving in
for the kill — Kill? Who said Kill?

Love, let us be true, he said,
eighteen inches between the plants,

love, lettuce, beet, rue, she kept
tending the garden, minding the roots.

Meanwhile the sea moved
as in sex, though it has no sex,

If I had to draw a picture
of God, I would draw the sea,

if I had to say I would call it she,
her absolute arms, her better than good

enough love, she said. Then he snipped
the ribbon that held her hair and tied

her wrists, no he tied a line
between two stakes, but she felt a tug,

the unlined sea pulled out, his arms
drew in. *C'mon, now, remember*

the rules: seeds fall and trees rise
and beach grass holds the shifting

sands, eighteen inches, love
your dad, mind your manners, don't —

She held a daisy against her breast.
How do you spell unh-uh? she asked,

but just then the ground swelled, oh
yes, the stakes fell, and the rocking sea

of love, where one still throbs inside
another, also throbbing, rose to meet them.

Nancy White

EVE'S GARDEN

So on he fares, and to the border comes
Of Eden, where delicious Paradise,
Now nearer, crowns with her enclosure green,
As with a rural mound the champaign head
Of a steep wilderness, whose hairy sides
With thicket overgrown, grotesque and wild,
Access denied . . .

Paradise Lost (IV 132-137)

1. Vulva

How like a coconut: cuppable,
shaggy, and milky-sweet
within. A soft sly sneaker, or
its's a big baby buggy! On fat
silver springs it rolls
through the sun. This is the hairy hill
where Milton's Eve reclines, resting
as if on a jelly
donut, white sugar powdering
her thighs, and she sighs, she rocks
and rises on her powder puff.

2. Clitoris

This pheasant's heart
beats in its feathered nest.
Lucifer's face alight between black
burlap wings, glossy and salt
as an olive. The whetstone
her hands return to. Oh, ship's
biscuit! Or the roan bronc who's already bucking
in the chute. Pineapple:
its tart cantankerous meat.

3. Labia minora

Down the center, little rooster wattles,
pressed like moist hands palm to palm.
These elephant ears hide-tough yet
delicate as sea-monkeys that came
dry and dead in the mail
but — JUST ADD WATER! — squirmed
to life under the lens. Pink tippling
chimneys, iris edges plump as snails
dizzy in their shells. They're like some lace
of the sea, sheltered and spongy as chanterelles.

4. Hymen

The imploded bugle,
Hard not to believe these nubs aren't cancerous
growth, random, protuberant.
Remember the gleam of the gate, the keeping out and in.

5. Vagina

Rippled as stairs worn
slick by the feet of nuns, century
after century, their words still
sussurant in the passage
They rocked on their knees, mopping this
floor, under the rose window the
sponges appearing soaked with blood.
At chapel they kissed in the dark
their palms and fingers, felt themselves
grow wet at the salty crease
where the elbow bends.

6. Cervix

Old fish-lips, complacent
as a potato. Satin pillow passive
but for the final involuntary gasps at
the always-unexpected capitulation to pleasure.
At the head of the throneroom, she
shudders and there's the power
behind the queen: the egg
wades slowly to pasture, to rupture
and rapture, to translucent blood anchorage, and exit.

7. Womb

Exit: to dream of vulvas and Eve's
expulsion where lush trees rocked,
tipped with pink fruit, and of the dew sinking
its icy silver tongues into the grass. *Exit:*
to dream the round fountain
at the center whose reflection casts
our own faces back, saying,
this is all, this miraculous kite
that pulls you — back — we can almost touch —
back to the wet egg wavering,
to the moment when the seed
burst toward us, began to climb, the slide and
jostle to be the one, the first succulent
hello, the savior and the brand.

ARTICULOS RELIGIOSOS

Keko's the name of the statuette
with bags of fruit and money,
a gingerbread house that stands for family
strapped to his back the way a weight-
lifter's belt protects him from harm.
The shopkeep props a lit cigarette
in his mouth to give him

life. While he smokes, I finger
Mr. Lucky's *I Can, You Can't* powder,
cattails of incense, male
and female black felt dolls whose powers,
coiled in turbans, the blushing
clerk won't tell. I wonder
if working here she has given up god

or taken him back. Does she pray
for the daughter with Down's Syndrome
whose small hands grab like fish
at anything shiny? The child's eyes flicker,
roll back in her head, seized
by what the ancients called
the prophet's sleep. And she does point

to the porcelain tableau I settle on —
a saint and her petitioners at sea.
Caridad de Cobre's cloak, upswept
to a billow, could capsize or safely beach
the boat of storm-tossed men at her feet.
She's meant to stand in water, the woman
explains, returning the sample to its fish

bowl on the counter, like Liberty
in New York harbor. Meanwhile, and forever,
the sailors parry the savage
blue hooks of the sea. Such turbulence
it takes for their salvation, water
lapping their chins as the cash drawer
rings open.

THISTLES

I'm wearing my sunglasses that intensify
color, staring at the violas in the clay
pot, their yellow and purple questioning
faces, and remembering the thistles
that furred the swale behind our house
in Tel Aviv. They were tall and tough,

with flowers like lavender shaving
brushes bleached to a dirty
pink. Striking, but not pretty,
like an evening gown in tatters
and later, when the tufts loosened,
a woman gone so crazy she forgets

to comb her hair.
You smuggled
some seeds when we moved
to Florida, but none of them grew. Like us,
I think they needed hardship
to thrive, not this steady babble
of sun and rain.

I am drinking a beer and listening
to a sad song on the radio. Tears fall
without my will, the way it happens
when you are so full of grief
that it brims over if you touch
something beautiful or see a small

kindness in public. I am hardly
here, I am the "I" a leaf would have
if it spoke against the wind. The song
is that old one about an Irish woman
who loved an Englishman and was burned
at the stake. The hair on his head

like a golden sea, the fine blue
threads at her wrists. *O my love!*
O my joy! is the refrain, which I always
thought was the lover's farewell,
but imagine now is the woman herself,
already bound, queen of her straw

mountain. She looks out upon her last
day and sees not the assembled
crowd, faces distinct from clouds,
but only shapes, that correspondence that must be
what they mean by God — farmers completing
the curve of the sickles they lean on,

crescents of flesh above the women's
scoop-necked blouses, globes of red
clover glowing like coals in the fields
and now the halo that will bless
her, already shining as it rises up
around her feet.

THE LADDER: ROGER VAIL'S PHOTO OF A ROCKFACE IN THE CARRARA (ITALY) MARBLE QUARRIES

Imagine a world so heavy
that even the sun is squeezed dark!
As this photo imagines the world,
all light is pinched
out onto three toothed cables that saw the world

horizontal. Only the photo's tiny
ladder (lower right), so small
that maybe it's only the genetic imprint
of a ladder is the way

up out of the blackness.
Imagine what it takes to make this world,
imagine so much of everything —
tractors, BIC pens, Spandexed teen flesh —
so much of everything that it crushes

itself homogeneous & to go on being human
means to want pain,
to suffer so many sawcuts for the sake

of beauty! Forty-two years ago,
when the two county cops
dragged an Iowa limestone quarry
pool for Billy Thiel's body,
I watched the sun
on the wet trawling cable saw up through
the blackness all that muggy Labor Day,
the cop boat dividing the world

into boat-width strips.
Swim? God, no, I'd never swim there,
but every day afterward I put
a toe down, dropped a coin,
my sister's doll's arm, something human,

until all of me was in the blackness.
Now I know I'm balanced on a ladder of humans,
blackness to my chin.
I can only intuit all of those under me,

sway as they sway —
there must be a man under the man
whose shoulders I'm standing on.
Over the blackness, two cops, inquisitors, row.
The fat one (I see only his outline)

bends out of the john-boat to me —
"do you abjure," he whispers,
"do you abjure?"

ROGER VAIL'S PHOTO OF A WORKED-OUT MOUNTAIN IN THE CARRARA (ITALY) MARBLE QUARRIES

This is the mountain before which
art is helpless
& only self-recrimination —
the metaphor is marble

a mile thick under the Apennines.
Orphaned out of corroborating poor rock,
marble the color of linen dried

at the armpit, & so many other whites
nacreous or wild
with amethyst accents (a kind of marble

neurosis). Maybe art helped
Michelangelo's muscular
Slaves to half-climb out of marble

by themselves, but pietàs will crack
with human feelings.
An art that makes gods human

curses humans —
how many weak gods died out
in marble, all Argus
eyes or genitalia & the one god

left over is soliloquist
to Dante whom local quarry legend puts
here above his hell

inventing verbs for the sinned-on flesh,
while, ironically, 700 years
elsewhere on this same mountain,
a quarry workman in corduroys
& cheap Zagreb workshoes cuts out

a new god so hard
that the man goes deaf at the marble
saw whining acerbic disbelief.

WITH EDDIE AND NANCY IN AREZZO AT THE CAFFE GRANDE

Piero in wraps, the True Cross *sotto restauro,*
Piazza desolate edge
Where sunlight breaks it,
desolate edge
Where sunlight pries it apart.
A child kicks a soccer ball. Another heads it back.

The Fleeting World, Po Chu-I says, short-hops a long dream,
No matter if one is young or old —
The pain of what is present never comes to an end,
Lightline moving inexorably
West to east across the stones,
cutting the children first, then cutting us.

Under the archways, back and forth among the tables,
The blind ticket seller taps and slides.
Lotteria di Foligno, Lotteria di Foligno,
he intones,
Saturday, mid-May, cloud bolls high cotton in the Tuscan sky.
One life is all we're entitled to, but it's enough.

WITH SIMIC AND MARINETTI AT THE GIUBBE ROSSE

Where Dino Campana once tried to sell his sad poems
Among the tables,
Where Montale settled into his silence and hid,
Disguised as himself for twenty years,
The ghosts of Papini and Prezzolini sit tight
With Carlo Emilio Gadda
somewhere behind our backs.

Let's murder the moonlight, let's go down
On all fours and mewl like the animals and make it mean what it means.
Not even a stir.
Not even a breath across the plates of gnocchi and roast veal.
Like everything else in Florence, that's part of the past,
The wind working away away kneading the sea so muscles . . .

Those who don't remember the Futurists are condemned to repeat them.
We order a grappa. We order a mineral water.
Little by little, the lucid, warm smile of the moon
Overflowed from the torn clouds.
Some ran.
A cry was heard in the solitude of the high plains.
Simic e Wright sulla traccia. La luna ammazzata.

MANUSCRIPT FOUND IN A CONRAD NOVEL

In those throbbing countries that breathe out the summer
The day is blinding in its pure white heat. The day
Is a cruel stripe of light between slats of the shutter,
A flaming on the coast, and a fever on the plains.

But the ancient night is deep as a round earthenware jar
Of water. The surface is broken by myriad traces,
And drifting in a canoe, face turned to the starry spaces,
A man marks off the vacant hours with a cigar.

The grey smoke besmudges the remote constellations.
The here and now loses its name, its origin.
The world is a few pale, delicate imprecisions.
The river is the first river. The man, the first man.

MANUEL PEYROU

His was the generous exercise
Of genial friendship. He was the brother
To whom we can, in a black hour,
Tell everything, or, saying nothing,
Leave it to him to guess what pride's
Unwilling to confess. He loved
The variousness of earth, the riddle
Of being, the old human condition,
The pensive blue tobacco cloud,
Conversations that flow to dawn,
The game of chess, abstract, heraldic,
The many arabesques of chance,
The fine taste of fruit and fowl,
Sleepless coffee, the happy wine
That toasts and weds. A line of Hugo's
Could floor him. I have seen it happen.
Nostalgia was his soul's habit;
He liked to live in what was gone,
In legends of the knife-fighters
From Southside corners or Palermo,
Or lands forbidden him to see
With eyes of flesh: long-ripened France,
America of dawns and rifles.
In the vast morning he would vanish
Into inventing tales that Time
Shall not let fall, and which conjoin
That bravery that we once were
And the bitter savor of the present.
Then he was fading toward extinction.
This page is not an elegy.
I have not mentioned tears or stone
As rhetoric usually requires.
The windows darken. We have spoken
In plain words of a well-loved friend
Who cannot die. Who has not died.

translated by Robert Mezey

LAST TAKE

I watch them killing my husband.
Trained assassins, pumping round after
round from behind a camouflage truck:
they crouch toward his crumpling form.

Under the white floodlights,
blood jets sputter from his chest,
his head's thrown back. He shouts out a name, sliding down
the white wall against the damp flag of his shadow.

A little guillotine shuts. Hands sponge the wall.
He stands, alive again, so there's no
reason to fear this rehearsed fall, his captured cry,
the badly-cast revolution that asked his life.

The damask roses painted on the folding parlor screens
of the phony embassy are real in a way, but the walls
are fake and fake too, the passion of these two naked human
bodies
embracing on the Aubusson: nevertheless, they obsess

the eye like any caress: off-camera, the actor stroking his stubble
of beard, the actress's hands on her own small breasts.
Presented with the mirror of our sentiments, it seems
possible to believe that we love the world, ourselves.

Waiting in the wings like extras, full of desire
projected away from us. These sky-high fingers
of light imply all night we stand in for God here.
There is nothing to fear, he gets up and falls down again

in slow motion. A boom swings into the frame,
then out. Loaded dice are shaken onto green felt before
the trembling hands of the unwitting victims. A roulette
wheel turns: the red, the black, chemin de fer.

The train crosses the border: inside, rows of people jammed
together watch, weep. Like art featuring Life, the real
sky behind the starry backdrop fills with stars. The lovers kiss.
I want to cry out How much? How much do you love
each

other? But the director in his cherry-picker signals another take:
The sky grows light. It's late.

PRAGUE: TWO JOURNALS

— Jan Palach, a Czech student, burned himself to death protesting the 1968 Soviet invasion of Prague

"Avenue of Statues," Charles Bridge, 1970

Look at her, St.-somebody-or-other:
clutching her stone roses
like some ancient maid-of-honor.
A big girl who elbowed boldly up
to catch the bride's bouquet. She
caught the future: it wasn't hers.
The statues tremble:

see it? a blue spasm, like a wave, breaking over
the rigid faces, the stone musculature. Eye-flicker
of intent, maybe the sculptor's last gesture
completing itself in the unsettled stone? What
was just beyond the chisel's inference —

a long luxurious stretch, arms up, a yawn,
a bared breast. The shoe falls: what happened next.

History, like a bus, stopped and let us off,
in a pool of some light substance, stones of air.

A little crowd of long-hairs,
after curfew, out of our depth — it slowly dawns on us,
we're somewhere important!

A trail of rose-lit tents on the horizon,
and these saints with their raised spears:
sunrise.

Wenceslas Square, 1990

Havel's face everywhere, my daughter's hand in mine.
The street jammed all the way to the National.
I look for a plaque, a sign commemorating
his death. An old man, a bureaucrat, quietly pops corks,
carves ice wedges into swans, dolphins, girls —
hunched over an old file cabinet he's wrestled
to the curb. Snowy commas curl from his knife.
No plaque. No sad past tonight. A street singer
tries sleight-of-hand, but her cards are frayed.
Heretics ignite the images. Years make clear
their courage: they stood alone saying there's
a better god or forget god — refine an image,
worship it, refuse to go blind: see my numbered face?
All this faceted chance: diamonds, hearts?
My daughter watches the parade of cards, marked. I remember
how they covered the spot where he burned with rough pine.
It became, nevertheless, an off-limits shrine.
What's in the file under his name?
A pile of ashes. A glass of cheap champagne.

Charles Bridge, 1970

Hey Jude some kids intone at the sound of boots.
Did we think we'd go limp, recite Marcuse? Embossed flash
of a Red star, then a bullhorn's raised note.
We left right away. A student visa gets me to Kafka's grave,
but we're forbidden to sit among these thirty hooded figures,
or catch Z's like that sleeper in the shadow of a raised
stone axe. Or pass around hash in a flat pipe.
The weary mind closes its eyes behind the stone masks.

I woke up, dreaming an eye painted
over the missing breast of St. Ludmila,
protector of the outsider, the circling soul.
I dreamed I saw Jan Palach's ghost.

Who'd nothing to say to us, though I watched him
for a sign as he crossed. Beneath his feet,

the bridge hovered like a spacecraft on its sixteen pillars,
built to last: pink-lit, spanning the Vltava.

Faust House, 1970

In this house lived Edward Kelley, the English alchemist,
who transmuted gold at the Court of Rudolph Two.
To a pound of boiling mercury, he'd add a single
drop of blood-red oil and beckon the court,
                come see the brilliant grit in the pot!

Today soldiers reinforced the planks
over the spot. There was a girl there
who'd been his intimate. She cried but said nothing.
I saw his photograph, laughing. First the blood-red powder
added to the boiling contents of the crucible —
then you can just make it out
        through the colored smoke, bits of stars,
        spittle, a horse's bit, a blow to the sweet footman's skull:
            gold.

Golden Lane, 1990

Alchemists' Lane. Mouse-houses, sixteenth century, frowning
under the castle arches. Goldbeaters, so-called, fled here from
a fire. Up this diminishing street comes me, twenty years ago,
clutching my Duino Elegies. Flutter of silk at my neck. I could
recite all the once-resident writers: Seifert, Maranek, Kafka —
neighbors of Madame de Thebes the fortune teller and a man
    who owned a circus of white mice.
Later, at the hotel, I call an old phone number and then
    another.

I put weight on one boot-heel, showing off my Bohemian
ancestry,
college politics. Who would I be next? A voice says hello in
Czech,
then speaks English. Palach put in his pocket: a political tract,
a poor flower. Then the flames re-made him. Hello. My name is
Carol.

The Clementinum, 1970

At the Clementinum, I am shown the Latin hymnal on
parchment —
dirty words in Czech scribbled in the margins
by the noble ladies of St. George Convent. I'd give
my left tit to read this: Prague's earliest record of smut
written in the vernacular. By ladies. In a holy book. Well,
they were sick of the Empire, sick of the foreign liturgy.
Sick of being skirts. A pox on the rump of the fat Roman
priest! Jan Hus, the clear-eyed heretic,
threw out the sacristy's Papish gold.
Ladies, I give you the Roman Church, he said, in Czech,
and struck the match.

He burned fast she said to me today, the girl who was Jan
Palach's lover.

The Intercontinental Hotel Coffee Shop, 1990

In the Intercontinental Coffee Shop my daughter
rips her red lollipop free of a linen napkin,
reminding me suddenly of a rude passage I once glued
in an etiquette book. Something about the private parts
of Emily Post, a little kid's revenge —
though I still hate etiquette lessons. A jacket-back goes by,

the Soviet symbol with a bar through it.
Get it? says Annie, popping
her gum. *Down with red stars.*
Across the table from us is Jan Palach's lover.
In hat and scarf, though it's warm —
her face still young, but worn as a book paged through
by cynics. She talks fast, catching up to an old self.

Church of Our Lady of Tyn, 1970

Here's the marker for Tycho Braye,
the Danish astronomer who believed the earth
was the center of the universe. *Better to be*
than to seem to be was the motto carved on his headboard.
Outside, a light rain begins to fall. The girl at my side
tells me that her lover stuttered, *a slight impediment*
she says. But when he sang foreign rock: Blowin'
in the Wind, Satisfaction, there was no hesitation.
That day he died, he sang a song
he'd made up. It rhymed but when she tries
to think of it, it's gone, even in Czech
there are only commas. Tycho set the self
a task: an orbit defied. So in the mirror, he saw the face
floating to the left in its ring of flames, detached.

I kissed his arms she says and his neck and eyes.
Then we went out together, into the street.

Hotel Intercontinental Coffeeshop, 1990

She talks: I see her crossing the chalk lines
drawn shakily on the stones of the Square. He lengthens
beside her, the shadow of a flame on a wall. I see
the tanks, poking out their comic profiles. But then it's dim.
There was the place he walked to *in no uniform but the mind's fire.*

Then he turned from her, waving her back, waving away the
cheated,
shouting executioners.

He kept touching himself, she said.
Over and over as if he was a newborn, finding
his body for the first time. Then he began to bow,
growing transparent.

My daughter lifts
toothpicks gingerly, one by one, from their chance
prop-up in the hotel ashtray, trying not to disturb
the stack's internal balance. Bored, she looks
where she sees us looking: sun touching the fragile

interdependent pile. *In no uniform but the mind's fire.*
What we are looking at took twenty years to imagine.
Then the pile collapses, as if sucked inward. It grows
dark outside as she begins to weep, the toothpicks
are re-aligned, gum snaps, *no red stars*, and he burns

before us, he goes on burning.

NIGHT SONNET

Great wise night
Under the city walls
You pull me out of
The monster's socket

Lead me crazed
Out on the empty square
So I may walk again
Around myself

And see once more
That I'm still
A living creature

Son of thunder and smoke
The lost son
The solitary, well-salted — Nobody

THE NIGHT GAME OF THE MAKER OF FACES

From his mouth he takes out
Two petrified butterflies
Ties them with black thread and pulls them
Behind him
                between the parted furniture
The walls
                look at each other
The ceiling is surprised
                the butterflies
Hop
And land on each other
                so that his smile
Falls among things
So that he goes on smiling behind his back

MY NIGHT LABORS

Until the dark dawn —

on the empty square
I sit idle
selling rabbit salt mice fur

I run in place on the empty barrel
fly fly out of the double door
carrying night mail

I push a zero before me

with a wall on my back
I vanish between walls

I tremble before a tiny dog
and its huge puppy

all over town I carry a pole
my own and some hen's resting place

in the dead-end street
I water
somebody else's roses.

TO A MARKSMAN

Where are you, cooing pigeon breeder.
Look, I'm bringing you 13 clay pigeons.
Set up your contraptions, adjust your sights.
I'm neither in the title nor in the poem.
Truly not. I'm in some other distant place.

I'll be watching you out of the shadows.
The way you grab and rip, casually, in passing.
One can still write about everything,
and of you it's easiest. You sit in a wooden chair
on level ground, gentle, kind.
Years pass, the grass grows, tears ripen, words
shine.

The mouse crawls
into the pumpkin.

translated by Charles Simic

PLANES

Dream clock — next port of entry — . . .
By diurnal moonlight, by dream clock, by star-
blueprint
it approaches

•

Over here they are sharpening
the seeing-eye knife,
etc.

•

Her hand on my

shoulder
without a name

•

Tempus fuckit

•

Funny, I sometimes feel like a motherless child (trad.)
too, unknown

black voice

•

Friends never met

•

Put in the dark
to hear no lark

•

Heart with a miner's face

•

Poem, my afterlife

Blue underwater statuary —

And when the sky gives up its dead

•

Thank you, I've just received yours

unless all these years
I've been misunderstanding

the verses. In any event

I'll scratch your back,
you knife mine . . .

•

— and when the sky gives up its dead

And when the dead rise blind groping around
for scattered bones, the skulls
they don like helmets
before setting out, bumping into one another sadly
as they hoarsely cry
the full name
of some only friend

THE WEEPING

He *has* considered weeping, only
he can't even bring himself to

take a stab at it. He just can't cry —
it is terrible to cry

when you're by yourself, because
what then?

Nothing is solved,
nobody appears;

even solitary children understand. This
apparent respite, this apparent quenching

of the need to be befriended
might (much like love in later years) leave you

lonelier than when you were merely alone.

UNTITLED

The unanswering cold, like a stepfather
to a silent child

And the light
if that's what it is

The steplight

No —

The light that's always leaving

IMPASSE

Something shines through the mountains. I follow it
among the trees. When it stops and turns
I stop. Why did this happen? — this encounter
no one wanted, no one needed?

Beyond where we stand, the curve of the world
bends into purple darkness. The cold is coming.
Everything that remains in the open will freeze,
and all who stand there will fall into silence.

I didn't intend it this way. My heart
isn't in it. But after you've done what you can
you just have to wait. That's how the mountains
do it, and all the earth, and the stars.

LEFT FOR THE BACK PAGES

Here in the back pages hide the little
strange ones. They learn their way
by how their syllables trend. And
you know how syllables always do, even when
powerful people are saying them.

Say some word-animal comes — maybe
a lion. Its tawniness begins to seethe
through the grass, the kind of lawn they have
where an ambush can happen. But I'm there
waiting, and it's my turn now — too bad for the lion.

You see? You see how the world gives way
when words live there? How brave
it is on the other side, where words
hide in the grass and run wild with truth
to defy the king, to deny my fear?

A VERY STILL LIFE

Over that dune lies the water, its engines
turned off for the winter, its winks and
rumples stilled.

The clouds come home dreaming of it, making
signs to the trees: a great thing lives
out there.

It wears the world's dirty linen. Mudded,
forgotten, it stands up like a camel.
The snow

goes on wooling it. The tips
of broken bottles pock it —
chimneys

of lost bunkers. You can't guess
how quiet it is. A woman from town
walks

its blond ridges. Even the slat-fence
that keeps the beach open disobeys,
lies down.

A MEMBER OF THE WEDDING

If I could remove the head of the man in front of me,
I'd see the bride instead of her proud father,
her glad father instead of the nervous groom,
the nimble groom instead of the deaf priest,
the slow priest instead of the sprinkled water,
the blessed water instead of the wrinkled sea,
the wide sea instead of the crowded sky,
the mackeral sky instead of the wheeling sun,
the dealing sun instead of the drumming moon,
the bald moon, bride of heaven,
beautiful in her emptiness,
beautiful with nothing to hide,
beautiful as the head of the man in front of me,
beautiful as the bride.

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FIELD is very proud to announce that a new and selected Poems by DENNIS SCHMITZ will inaugurate its new contemporary poetry series.

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MIKE WILKENS
Preamble, 1987

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